

Captain W. E. Johns

BIGGLES

IN THE TERA



KNIGHT



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FOREWORD

THIS WORD 'JUNGLE'

Many countries have found it necessary, or desirable, to coin a word to describe tracts of land peculiar to themselves, and these have often found their way into the vocabularies of other peoples who, naturally, did not have a name for something they themselves did not possess.

For examples we have *prairie*, the wide areas of level grassland of Central North America. Moving south, the similar treeless plains of tropical America are called *savannah*. In South Africa the early Dutch settlers called their open country the *veldt*. In Europe, from the Mediterranean island of Corsica we have *maquis*, a single word which describes the dense forests of dwarf evergreen shrubs, or tall white heather, that cloaks so much of the island. From the barren plains of arctic and sub-arctic Russia comes *tundra*, meaning a frozen or partially frozen desert in which nothing grows except mosses and lichens. But the word with which we are concerned is *jungle*.

India inevitably had to have a name for its vast expanses of wild, virgin country; or territory that had been deserted and allowed to revert to anything nature cared to make of it. The native word in the Hindi language was *jangal*, which in English, with very little alteration, has become *jungle*.

Up to the time of the British occupation of India we had no use for such a word, but having helped ourselves to it we now exploit it far outside its literal meaning. A few nettles, weeds or brambles, become a jungle. A modern city has been called a 'concrete jungle', which surely is stretching the word too far — unless it is intended simply to suggest a dangerous place.

Apart from its misuse, the term jungle has served a convenient purpose because much of the land surface of our planet in the region of the Equator, where there is a high rainfall, can be broadly described as jungle, although in most cases a more correct word would be forest. The vegetation of tropical America, Africa and Asia, consists mostly of great trees.

But let us not quibble over the precise meaning of a word we all understand. When it is used we know the sort of picture it is intended to convey: a place with dense undergrowth, perhaps with a few trees, through which a man can only advance with difficulty unless he has a cutting tool to clear a path. It may or may not be literally impenetrable. Size has nothing to do with it. In fact, areas to which the word jungle could be, and is applied, occur in every country except where the absence of water has created a desert. Usually, however, the word implies tropical vegetation, probably with dangerous inhabitants — animals, insects and reptiles.

In the following pages the word is used in its true sense, so let us glance at what might be called a classic example of jungle, as it occurs in its country of origin, and discover how it came to be there, because we shall have more to

say about it presently.

If you care to open your atlas and turn to the map of India you will observe on the extreme north-east frontier a country about five hundred miles long and shaped rather like a sausage. This is the independent Kingdom of Nepal with whom we have been on friendly terms for a hundred and fifty years. It has helped us with men and materials in two world wars. As remote as a country could be, it lies in three broad terraces, each with its own climate and vegetation as the altitude increases towards the shadows of the mighty Himalayas.

The original inhabitants were, it is believed, of Mongolian stock; but at some period of the eighteenth century certain warlike tribes in Central India decided to move northward. Why they did this we don't know, but from the earliest times, before the world was surveyed and frontiers fixed, it was not uncommon for a nation to pick up its belongings and seek a new land in which to live. There are many examples of such migrations. Perhaps the soil had become impoverished. Perhaps game was getting scarce, for animals migrate as well as humans. People may have fled before invaders or from an epidemic disease.

At all events, these warrior tribes of Central India, always travelling north, did not stop until they reached the fair and pleasant land which we call Nepal. They dropped their loads at a little town named Gurkha, some forty miles from that still legendary capital, Katmandu. They were not opposed. Presumably there was plenty of room for everyone. They settled down, intermarried with the local people and in course of time produced a cheerful, utterly fearless race of little brown men famous for their fighting qualities. Their religion is Hindu.

Known as Gurkhas (after their original settlement) they have for years furnished the British Army with some of its most loyal and efficient regiments.¹ Their standard weapon in the army is a heavy curved knife two feet long called a *kukri*. Actually it is more than a weapon. It is often used for household chores. Boys start early to carry one, with the result that by the time they have grown up they are expert in its use. Not only can they quickly slash a path through a jungle; the *kukri* will just as easily peel a potato as it will remove the head from the shoulders of an enemy.

One might not suspect it, but a little brown man sitting outside his home in far-off Nepal may have seen active service all over the world and is now enjoying his declining years on a well-earned British army pension. We have a minister in Katmandu and the Nepalese have a minister of equal rank in London. But this came later.

All the early Gurkhas (or Gurkhalese or Nepalese, if you prefer it) wanted, was to be left alone in peace. They had good reason to think they had nothing to fear from the north because their country lay in the shadow of the most stupendous mountain system on earth. The giants of the Himalayas. The average elevation is 18,000 feet, and forty of the mountains, in range after

range divided by fearful chasms, top 24,000 feet. Invasion could hardly come that way. A smart well-equipped party might cross this terrifying divide, but not an army with all the baggage an army needs.

Of the south they were not so sure. Trouble might come through India. To rule out this possibility, in 1815 they called in nature to erect a barrier. All they had to do was leave untouched, uncultivated, a strip of marsh land, twelve miles wide, all along their southern boundary. This was the *Tariyani*, or as it is more often called, the *Terai*. Nature made a good job of it. This land, left alone, became the perfect jungle. In it can be found the best that nature can produce, and the worst; the most beautiful, and the ugliest; the most harmless and the deadliest. No army commander in his right mind would try to march troops through it. What a modern tank would make of it is open to speculation; but the drivers, even if they got through, would be in a sorry state by the time they arrived in Nepal. No other country in the world enjoys such natural protection.

Now let us have a closer look at this genuine jungle because presently we shall need to know more about it; what to expect. This is the picture.

For the sportsman or the naturalist it is not without its fascination. An ideal sanctuary for animals, and birds with brilliant tropical plumage, at a certain season of the year a visitor might imagine he had arrived in paradise. He would be quickly disillusioned. The heat, and a myriad stinging, biting, bloodthirsty insects would see to that. During the monsoon, and after, it is a very different cup of tea. The thunderstorms are of unimaginable intensity. Those who have experienced them claim the thunder and lightning are continuous.

Much of the terrain, as we have already remarked, is marshy, for it is threaded by several rivers. After the rainy season, there are vast areas of swamp from which spring dense growths of rushes up to fifteen feet high. Wide clumps of bamboo and rattan can present unclimbable fences. These conditions are of course perfect for mosquitoes, and here they are monsters with particularly voracious appetites. The Terai also breeds a great variety of other savage insects to make life uncomfortable if not intolerable. It is no place for a picnic.

That other curse of the tropics, the leech, is also there in force. Sitting on a leaf or hanging from a twig it looks like a short piece of string. It is blind, but on the approach of anything with blood in it, it coils itself like a spring and jumps; it rarely fails to hit its mark. Once on you it will get to your skin somehow, somewhere, regardless of any protective clothing you may adopt. By the time it has had its fill of your blood and drops off it is a huge bloated slug. If you try to remove it before it is ready it leaves its head under your skin to set up a festering sore. All warm-blooded animals are plagued by this foul little beast.

As you would expect there are crocodiles, as there are in almost all Indian rivers. As for snakes, all we need say about them is they include some of the

most poisonous in the world. Size matters little. A twenty-foot python may be less dangerous than the *krait*, a small snake, but unless help is at hand its bite means death in a matter of minutes. The same with that evil-looking little horror, the cobra.

The monarch of this frightening kingdom is of course the tiger. Apart from man he has nothing to fear; but even he has been known to die from infected wounds caused by thorns or porcupine quills which he is unable to remove.

This side of the picture looks alarming, but it is not all bad. The vegetation can be enchanting as well as ugly. There are woods of chestnut, walnut, cherry, mimosa and other trees to provide retreats for tribes of monkeys and roosts for peacocks and other tropical birds. There are flowering shrubs in profusion. From the trees, on the bark of which they live, hang rare and lovely orchids, dropping their waxen petals on a wonderful variety of terrestrial flowers, the resort of exquisite butterflies and moths.

This, then, is the jungle, the real Indian *jangal*, the jungle known as Terai. There is no great difficulty in getting to it. The people to whom it belongs are friendly. All you need is the money for your fare!

W. E. J.

¹ At the time of writing (1964) in the British Army there are four Gurkha Infantry Regiments, each of two Battalions. In addition the Gurkhas provide an Engineer Regt., a Signal Regt., an Army Service Corps and Military Police personnel. All are based on Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong, but four or five battalions at any one time are operating in Borneo.

CHAPTER 1

WHERE IS ALGY?

Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth entered the office of his Chief, Air Commodore Raymond of the Air Police, and accepted an invitation to be seated. This was the usual prelude to a problem, so he took a cigarette from the box pushed towards him, and waited. He was not in a hurry and he was not perturbed. This was a common occurrence.

The Air Commodore signed the document he had been reading, put down his pen and looked Biggles in the face. 'How long is it since you heard from Lacey?' he inquired.

'The last letter I had from Algy was about a fortnight ago,' answered Biggles.

'Have you got the letter on you?'

'No, sir. It's in my office. Shall I fetch it? He didn't say very much. I can remember the gist of it.'

'What exactly did he say?'

'He said he had just about got things buttoned up, so in a day or two he would be handing everything over to the Indian Customs for them to do the rest.'

'Which means he must have got to the bottom of this gold-smuggling racket.'

'That's how I took it. He said there would soon be nothing to keep him in India, so he reckoned to be coming home in two or three weeks' time. There were still one or two little things he had to do, which meant, I imagine, when he wrote, he was still short of some piece of conclusive evidence.'

The Air Commodore, with his eyes still on Biggles' face, went on. 'Did he tell you in his letter how the thing was being worked?'

'No.'

'Pity. Why not, I wonder!'

Biggles shrugged. 'You know how it is in the East. Algy is an old hand. He'd know how hard it is to find someone who could be trusted implicitly. He'd probably hesitate to put anything important in writing for fear of his letters being tampered with. Bribery and corruption is as common there as it is here when big money is at stake.'

'From what you tell me, at the time of writing he hadn't disclosed to the Indian authorities what he knew, or suspected.'

'If he was wise he'd keep that under his hat until the last moment for fear of a whisper getting out to give the crooks a chance to slip away under the net. I don't have to tell you that all too often the big bad boys get away, leaving the small fry to take the rap.'

The Air Commodore nodded. 'Too true,' he sighed. 'From where was

Lacey's last letter posted?'

'From a place called Shara. I assumed he was operating from there.'

'Do you know anything about Shara?'

'Very little. I'd never heard of it. I looked it up and found it, a small place, in Upper Bengal, no great distance from Patna.'

'I know a little more than that. I got some particulars from a colleague at the India office. The airfield was originally laid as a training ground for service pilots. When that was packed up it became a public aerodrome and an overnight stop for civil aircraft. Today I gather it's little more than an air junction and refuelling station in charge of a care and maintenance party.'

'Algy's first letters came from Calcutta. I wondered why he had moved his base farther north.' Biggles frowned as if a thought had struck him. 'Why this sudden concern for him?'

'He's missing.'

Biggles stiffened. 'He's *what*?'

'Missing. So you needn't expect him back yet — if at all.'

'How much do you know about this?'

'Actually, very little. He took off on what he told his maintenance engineer he hoped would be his last reconnaissance from Shara. Apparently he flew off to check something. He didn't come back. He still hasn't shown up.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Ten days.'

'How do you know about it?'

'I've just had a letter from the India Office in London. They thought I ought to know. You can read the letter. It doesn't tell us much. No doubt they've told us as much as they know.'

'What was he flying?'

'A Hunter.'

Biggles stared. 'A *Hunter*. What the devil was he doing in a Hunter?'

The Air Commodore shook his head. 'It's no use asking me.'

'He went out in one of our Austers. Where is it? Do they say?'

'It's still at Shara. They want to know if we're going to fetch it.'

Biggles lit another cigarette.

The Air Commodore continued. 'He must have borrowed the Hunter from the Indian Air Force. They have some. It was fully armed — if that means anything.'

Biggles looked up. 'I'd say it means a lot. He wouldn't be likely to attack another aircraft in any circumstances; so it sounds to me as if he thought he might be interfered with and wanted to be in a position to defend himself.'

'That could be the answer.'

'He didn't say where he was going?'

'No. Well, not as far as is known.'

'He wouldn't, of course,' muttered Biggles. 'There's just a chance he may have said something, dropped a hint, perhaps, to the engineer who had charge

of the machine. I take it he would be an Indian.'

'Naturally. The man has been questioned. All he knows is, when the Hunter took off it headed north.'

'I suppose a search has been made?'

'Search planes have been out every day. Hence the delay. Our Indian friends didn't want to upset us until they'd done everything possible on the spot. Now they're satisfied Algy won't be coming back, the search has been called off. You know India better than I do, so you can judge what hope there is of finding the remains of an aircraft, particularly if it is down in jungle country.'

Biggles thought for a moment. 'There are a lot of airfields in the north of India. We built them when we were there as forward bases to keep the recalcitrant tribes, like the Waziris and Mahsuds, from raiding the plains.'

'Yes, but that was on the north-west frontier, where there was so often trouble.'

Biggles admitted this was true. 'I don't know much about the north-east, where apparently Algy had been working. If the old airfields are being maintained Algy might be down on one of them.'

'There isn't much hope of that, and you know it,' returned the Air Commodore gravely. 'Inquiries would be made at any that are still in use. However, I'll ask about that. I seem to remember reading during India's recent troubles with China that they cleared some forward ground for airstrips for the transportation of supplies and the evacuation of the wounded. I imagine that would be nearer the fighting, farther to the west. But as I say, I'll find out about that. Can you remember anything else Lacey said in his letter?'

'He mentioned that what we were looking for, meaning the gold, of course, was coming in by air from the north.'

'That surprises me. Where could it come from in the north?'

'I don't know. I imagine it could start from China. The Chinese now hold Tibet. It's no great distance, as a plane flies if the pilot is sober, from Tibet down into India.'

The Air Commodore's eyebrows went up. 'Over the Himalayas?'

'Mountains don't affect an aircraft if it has the necessary altitude performance to keep them underneath it.'

'True enough. But why should China import gold into India?'

'One could think of political reasons why China would like to have a good supply of ready cash in India. Intelligence agents would have to be paid and there might be bribes to be handed out.'

'Are you suggesting the Chinese government might be involved in this?'

'It's possible. As things are today nothing would surprise me. On the other hand the racket might be a private undertaking, with or without the connivance of the Chinese government. I'd keep an open mind about that. But one thing is certain. After the recent fuss between India and China, the Chinese must have plenty of agents in India. Where else is there north of

Shara?’

‘Afghanistan is now a Soviet sphere of influence.’

‘I’d rule that out as being too far to the west. Algy would hardly base himself at Shara if he had reason to think the stuff was coming through the Khyber Pass. Russia has plenty of gold, but if she wanted to help India, having fallen out with China, there would be no need to smuggle the gold in.’

‘How about Nepal?’

Biggles shook his head. ‘I can’t see the Nepalese government, even if it had gold to spare, lending itself to a smuggling racket. They’re wide awake, and if anyone was crazy enough to try anything like that on the quiet, he’d soon be spotted. Nepal is no country for casual aviation, anyway. It means putting your life in your engine. Anyhow, I’m pretty sure that if Algy was down in Nepal we’d have heard of it.’

‘That is, supposing the crash had been found.’

‘If you’re going to look at it like that, whether he’s down in the mountains, or in that green hell they call the Terai, it would be a waste of time to look for him. All the same, we can’t just leave it like that. Something will have to be done. His Hunter should be found if only to learn why it was forced down: I say forced down because I can’t see him trying to land for any other reason.’

‘You think we should look for him?’

‘Definitely. Someone will have to fly out to bring his Auster home, anyway.’

‘You feel like going yourself?’

‘With your permission I shall most certainly go. You could help me by arranging facilities with the Indian and Nepalese governments. They both have ministries in London.’

‘What shall I tell them?’

‘Not more than is absolutely necessary. I’d prefer to say nothing at all, but that isn’t practicable. Algy’s disappearance may be purely accidental, an ordinary hazard of flying; on the other hand someone may have got wind of what he was doing and put him on the spot to be liquidated. If that is so, what has happened to him could happen to me.’

‘Leave it to me,’ returned the Air Commodore. ‘It’s unfortunate that when Lacey wrote to you he didn’t give you a hint of where he was going and what he intended to do.’

‘He may have said too much as it is,’ replied Biggles grimly. ‘Someone may have seen that letter.’

‘But you say there was nothing in it that really mattered.’

‘What he did say, and the fact that the letter was addressed to me here at Scotland Yard, might have been enough to throw a hammer in the gears. Come to think of it, Algy did say the idea behind the racket was an original one, and when the net was cast there would be some queer fish in it. I’ll read his letter again to see if it’s possible to see anything between the lines. You don’t object to me going to India?’

‘Go if you feel you should.’

‘I most certainly do.’

‘Our friends in India will say they’ve done all that is humanly possible to find Lacey and I wouldn’t doubt that.’

‘Nor I. But someone with a personal interest, as I have, might go further than a disinterested party.’

‘You don’t feel like waiting a little while to see if Lacey turns up?’

‘No, sir. If he’s down he may still be alive. If he’s somewhere in the jungle every day is important. One might say every hour, certainly if he’s injured.’

‘Very well, but don’t be away too long. I’ll leave it to you to make your own arrangements. There’s no need for me to tell you what to do. Will you take anyone with you?’

‘I’d rather go alone; but as I shall fly out, as the quickest way of getting to the scene of operations, I shall have to take someone with me because there will be two machines to be brought home, my own and Algy’s Auster. I shall probably take Bertie with me. That will leave Ginger here to attend to anything urgent. I shall take the new Auster with the long-range tank. It may not be very fast, but it would be a suitable type for what I may have to do when I get to India.’

‘Very well. Let’s leave it like that. You’d better let me have a list of the things you’d like me to do — letters of introduction, and so on.’

Biggles got up. ‘I’ll do that, sir, right away.’

He made his way, deep in thought, back to his own office. ‘Bad news, chaps,’ he announced to Bertie and Ginger, who were there.

‘Spill it, old boy,’ requested Bertie cheerfully.

‘Algy’s missing.’

Bertie’s expression changed. ‘Oh no!’

‘Fraid so.’

‘How do you know?’

‘The Chief has just had a chit from the Indian Office.’

Ginger spoke. ‘How long ago did this happen?’

‘About ten days.’

‘What do they say? When we last heard from Algy he said he was nearly ready to come home.’

‘I know. Apparently something went wrong at the last minute, on his final sortie. All we know is he took off from Shara in a Hunter which he must have borrowed from the Indian Air Force. He was last seen heading north. He didn’t come back. It seems he didn’t land on any airfield within range, but quite obviously he’s somewhere on the carpet. Goodness only knows where that might be. I’m going out right away to look for him. That’s all we can do.’

‘Surely a search has been made for him?’

‘Of course, but so far without result. The searchers would simply be looking for a stray Hunter. They wouldn’t suspect foul play.’

‘You do?’

‘We’ve reason to. We know why he was there. So, I imagine, in view of what’s happened, did someone else.’

‘But look here, I say, old boy, what the deuce was Algy doing in a Hunter?’ inquired Bertie in a puzzled voice, polishing his eyeglass. ‘I mean to say, it doesn’t make sense.’

‘We may never know. There must have been a good reason.’

‘He was in a big hurry, perhaps.’

‘It’s more likely he was expecting trouble and wanted to be able to hit back should somebody go for him.’

‘Where’s his Auster?’

‘At Shara, where he left it.’

‘What are you going to do about this?’

‘The Chief has given me the okay to fly out and make inquiries on the spot.’

‘What about us?’

‘I’d rather go out alone, but someone will have to come with me to fly home Algy’s Auster if we can’t find him, or if he doesn’t turn up. I can’t fly two machines at once. Bertie, you’d better come. Don’t let’s have any argument about that.’

Ginger looked disappointed. ‘What have I done wrong?’

‘Nothing. But we can’t all go. Someone will have to stay here to deal with anything urgent. Besides, if a posse of English police descended on Shara, some people might wonder what it was all about. I’d rather keep things as quiet as possible.’

Ginger nodded. ‘I see that.’

Biggles went on. ‘You might dig out all the letters we’ve had from Algy since he’s been away. It’s quite a while and for a start I’d like to refresh my memory. He may have said something, dropped a hint of how things were going, that didn’t hit me at the time. It’s a very different matter now.’

Ginger opened a drawer, pulled out a manila folder and laid it on Biggles’s desk. ‘Here they are.’

Biggles lit a cigarette and settled down to read.

1 Regular readers of the Biggles adventures may recall that Air Police Sergeant Algy Lacey had, on account of his experience, been temporarily seconded to the Indian Security Police to help them to unravel the mystery of how a considerable quantity of illicit gold continued to find its way into India in spite of all that had been done to put a stop to what was evidently a well-organized contraband racket with plenty of money behind it.

And in case the reader should wonder why the smuggling of gold into India is such a lucrative occupation, the reasons should be explained. In the first place it is customary for certain classes to carry their worldly wealth on their persons, and gold is the most convenient way of doing this. Secondly, Indians do not care much for artificial jewellery. An Indian woman would rather have one thin piece of fine gold wire round her wrist than a dozen imitation gold bracelets.

CHAPTER 2

BIGGLES ARRIVES

A week later an Auster aircraft, conspicuous for its British registration letters, landed on the dusty sunbaked airfield at Shara, a somewhat primitive-looking establishment by modern standards. Originally a British Supply and Maintenance Depot, it had been kept in use, with a skeleton staff, chiefly as a refuelling station because it happened to be a junction for one or two of the smaller regular Indian air services. There were no concrete runways, which dated it in the pre-jet age. A wind-stocking hung limply on its pole. However, there were two old-fashioned hangars, so no doubt the airfield served its purpose. Biggles, from inquiries he had made, was prepared for this.

He taxied on slowly to the administrative buildings. Reaching them, out of the way of possible traffic, he stopped. The airscrew died. He got out. Bertie followed. After a brief survey of the scene, they walked on to the central block. An employee directed them to the office of the general manager. Reaching the door, Biggles took some letters from his pocket, selected one, returned the others to the pocket, and knocked. Receiving an invitation to enter, he opened the door and they walked in.

There were two persons in the office, both of course, men of the country. One, a stoutish, middle-aged man dressed in a white linen uniform, sat at a large desk under a slowly-revolving electric fan. The other, a younger man and presumably an assistant or a clerk, occupied a table, with a typewriter, against the wall. He was well dressed and wore large horn-rimmed glasses. Through them he considered the visitors without a change of expression.

‘I’m looking for Mr Kama Akbar,’ announced Biggles. ‘I have a letter of introduction.’

The man at the desk rose with a smile and offered his hand. ‘You won’t need it,’ he said in a cheerful, friendly voice. ‘I’m sure you must be Mr Bigglesworth. I’ve been expecting you, having been told you were on your way here. Please be seated. Can I send for some refreshment?’

‘Not at the moment, thank you. Presently, perhaps. This is my friend, Lord Lissie, although he prefers to be known as *Mister* Lissie. So you had word that I was coming!’

‘Yes. I was asked by my head office at Calcutta to give you every possible assistance. If it happens I am not here, my personal secretary, Mr Bula Din, will attend to you.’

The man at the table stood up and bowed slightly. ‘At your service, gentlemen,’ he said smoothly, and resumed his seat.

Biggles acknowledged the introduction and went on: ‘Then you know why we are here?’

‘I understand you have come to fetch the Auster plane which Mr Lacey left

here.'

'That is one reason,' confirmed Biggles. 'What is more important, we are hoping to learn what exactly happened to him, or even better, find him. We were very close friends. Do you mind if I smoke a cigarette?'

'Not in the least. It happens that I don't use tobacco, so I couldn't offer you one. Anything we can do here to help you will be done, I assure you. We have done everything possible to find Mr Lacey, but with a limited number of aircraft at our disposal we couldn't continue the search indefinitely.'

'I understand that.'

'Moreover — and I might as well be quite frank with you — I do not think Mr Lacey will now be found. There was really no point in continuing to look for him.'

'You won't mind if we try to prove you are wrong?'

'Of course not. It will make me happy if you succeed.'

'We shall need some service while we are here. I have brought British government carnets for petrol and oil, so you can be sure you will be paid for everything. I will leave them with you.'

'Don't worry about that.'

'Where did Mr Lacey stay when he was here?'

'We have a rest-house on the aerodrome for visitors. There is a small staff to take care of everything, including food if it is required.'

'May we use it?'

'Of course. That is why it is here. The refreshment room is open to anyone who has business at the aerodrome.'

'Do you have a lot of visitors, then?'

'Quite a few, mostly *bona fide* travellers and their friends who come to see them off. Some change planes here according to their destination.'

Biggles hesitated for a moment. 'May I ask you this? Did you know what Mr Lacey was doing here?'

'I was not informed officially, but it was fairly obvious from the interest taken in him at Calcutta that he was in some way connected with our Security Service.'

'That is more or less correct. Your London office asked for the help of someone with experience of Customs evasions. It was possible that British regular service planes, or the crews that travel with them, were involved. Mr Lacey was sent out to investigate that particular angle. In the first place he went to Calcutta. Later, apparently, he came here. Do you know why?'

'No. He did not disclose the reason to me.'

'How long was he here?'

'Speaking from memory, I would say about three weeks. He had called once or twice before he came to stay.'

'So you must have got to know him fairly well?'

'Very well indeed. I found him a most courteous man and a delightful companion. He dined with me several times. I know all the staff here liked

him. I, personally, was very upset when he failed to return from his last flight.'

'Had you any reason to think he might not come back?'

'No. Such a thought never entered my head. From what I saw of his flying he struck me as a competent pilot who took no unnecessary risks.'

'Did he ever say anything to you to suggest there was a chance that he might not come back?'

'I can't recall anything. He was rather reserved. He didn't talk about his work, at any rate to me; but he seemed to know exactly what he was doing.'

Biggles nodded. 'He would. He was that sort of man. I believe, for his last flight, he took off in a Hunter — a single-seater military type.'

'That is so.'

'Was this the first time he had flown off from here in a Hunter?'

'Yes.'

'I imagine you were surprised to see him in such a machine?'

'I was very surprised. But he did not take me into his confidence and it was not for me to ask questions.'

'How did this come about? Where did he get the Hunter?'

'All I can tell you is this. One day he came to me and said he would have to go to Calcutta. It was not the first time. He took off in his Auster and came back in a Hunter — one of those, I assumed, that had been left in India by NATO after the frontier trouble with China.'

'Have you any idea at all why he wanted such an aircraft?'

'No. He must have had some special purpose in mind, but he didn't tell me what it was. I don't think he intended using the Hunter regularly because his Auster was flown back here from Calcutta by one of our own pilots. You'll find it in Number 2 hangar. The man in charge of it is the one who looked after Mr Lacey while he was here. I chose him myself.'

'For any particular reason?'

'Yes. For one thing he speaks English fluently. For another, he served for three years in your Air Force.'

'Indeed. How did that happen?'

'His name is Ram Singh. I knew him as a boy. His father, who died not long ago, was quite well off, so as the boy was anxious to make a career in aviation, he was able to send him to an aeronautical college in England. Then, to learn the practical side, he applied for enlistment in the Royal Air Force and was accepted. I was at Oxford myself at the time and saw quite a lot of him. Unfortunately your climate affected his health. He developed some chest trouble and was invalided out of the service. I advised him to return to India. Later I was able to get him a job here. He is a good fellow, intelligent, keen and energetic.'

'Would you mind if I had a word with him?'

'Not at all. Would you like me to send for him now?'

'No, thanks. We're not in all that hurry. I mustn't take up too much of your

time. Later on you can point him out to me.'

'You think he may be able to help you?'

'It is possible he may remember some remark made by Mr Lacey that would give us a clue as to where he was going in the Hunter.'

'I have spoken to him myself. I don't think he will be able to tell us more than we already know. However, you have a chat with him.'

'Thanks. I'm much obliged.'

The manager thought for a moment. Then he said: 'What else do you intend to do while you are here?'

'There's only one thing I can do and that is make a search in the general direction of Mr Lacey's last flight, which I understand was north of here.'

'We've covered the ground thoroughly.'

'I'm sure you have; but we can't leave this mystery unsolved while there is the remotest chance of finding our friend, dead or alive.'

'I understand how you feel,' answered Mr Akbar sympathetically.

'How far did your pilots carry their search?' inquired Biggles.

'As far as Nepal, which is no great distance from here. For obvious reasons we did not cross the frontier of East Pakistan. As you must know, our relations with Pakistan are somewhat strained and we don't want to aggravate them by violating their air space.'

'Naturally. You say you searched as far as Nepal. Does that mean your pilots actually flew over Nepal?'

'I couldn't be sure about that. Do you know India, Mr Bigglesworth?'

'Fairly well. I was born in India.'

'Really. How interesting. Then you may have heard of the Terai, that strip of jungle which is regarded as a sort of no man's land between India and Nepal?'

'Yes, I have heard of it, but I've had no practical experience of it.'

'You haven't missed much,' stated the manager somewhat grimly. 'I gather the search was certainly carried as far as the Terai. As the nearest point is a hundred miles from here, that left quite a lot of ground to be covered. Whether the search was carried on over the Terai I don't know. Pilots told me they had been as far as the Terai and I didn't press for details. For a search for an aircraft to be any use, a pilot would have to fly low, and few care to fly low where an emergency landing would mean a bad crash. It would be impossible for a plane to get down in the Terai.'

'Lacey may have crashed in the Terai.'

'It is possible, of course, but if that is what happened there would really be no point in spotting the plane. It could never be recovered.'

'Nepal has never thought it worth while to cut an airstrip for emergency landings?'

'Not to my knowledge. Why should they?'

'Do planes never cross it?'

'I wouldn't say that. There may be an occasional flight from India to

Katmandu, but I imagine such flights would be made at a high altitude to rule out any possibility of a forced landing in the Terai.'

'Who were the pilots who did the search?'

'They were strangers to me. They were sent up by Calcutta when I reported that Mr Lacey was missing. We have no pilots here for that sort of operation.'

'And when they had finished they returned to Calcutta?'

'Yes. If you want to see them you will have to go to Calcutta. Any more questions?'

'I can't think of anything else at the moment. There may be something later. I'm most grateful to you for being so helpful.'

'You will stay here for a little while?'

'Yes.'

'Have you any luggage?'

'There are two small bags in our aircraft.'

'I will have them taken to the rest-house.' Mr Akbar got up. 'Now I would be honoured if you would have lunch with me. You must be in need of a meal. Afterwards, I will take you to Ram Singh.'

'Thank you. That is most kind of you.'

'Then let us go.'

After a pleasant lunch at the manager's bungalow, washed and refreshed they walked with him to the hangars where Ram Singh was called out and introduced.

He was one of those good-looking young Indians with fine aristocratic features and a skin no darker than that of a European who has been out in the sun. He was as slim as a lance, a little too slim perhaps for it suggested a delicate constitution. He wore an old suit of British type khaki overalls, and on his head the customary white puggaree. The eyes under it were bright and alert.

Mr Akbar said, 'If you'll excuse me I'll leave you to talk. I have work to do. When you have finished here, Mr Bigglesworth, if you would like to continue our discussion you will find me in my office.'

He walked away.

CHAPTER 3

RAM SINGH

As some other members of the aerodrome staff were moving about, Biggles took the young Indian to a quiet spot in the shade of the hangar. Some packing cases provided seats. Ram Singh looked at Biggles expectantly, no doubt wondering what this was about.

‘We have come here hoping to find our friend, Mr Lacey, or solve the mystery of his disappearance,’ began Biggles. ‘I understand you had charge of his plane while he was here.’

Ram Singh confirmed this.

Biggles went on. ‘I believe you served for some time in the British Royal Air Force, for which reason you speak very good English.’

‘I do my best, sir.’

‘Good. We are hoping you will be able to help us. How did you get on with Mr Lacey?’

‘Very well indeed. I liked him. He was always kind and considerate; a real gentleman. And I think he liked me.’

‘Capital. I trust you will get on as well with us. Tell me this. When Mr. Lacey returned here from Calcutta with a Hunter aircraft, did he give you any sort of hint as to why he wanted such a machine? You must have been surprised!’

Ram Singh paused, his eyes looking up and down the hard-standing in front of the hangars. Biggles noticed it.

Looking at the face of the young Indian in front of him, he went on: ‘Have you any objection to answering questions that might help us to find Mr Lacey? If you have you might as well say so here and now, because that will save our time — and yours.’

‘I will do everything in my power to help,’ answered Ram Singh simply. ‘Mr Lacey told me very little, either about himself or what he was doing here at Shara. I remember, when he came back from Calcutta in the Hunter, he did say, in a joking sort of way, something about if anyone got in his way now he’d better watch out.’

‘But you didn’t take that seriously?’

‘No. Mr Lacey liked his little joke.’

‘He didn’t say *why* he wanted a Hunter?’

‘No.’

‘Did Mr Lacey ever tell you why he was in India?’

‘No. He never mentioned any particular reason to me.’ Again Ram Singh’s eyes flashed up and down the concrete apron.

Biggles’s voice dropped a tone. ‘Are you sure you are telling me the truth?’

‘I always tell the truth.’

‘Good. Then what are you afraid of?’

‘I am not afraid, but...’

‘But what? Out with it. You can trust us. Anything you say will be treated in the strictest confidence.’

Again Ram Singh hesitated before he went on: ‘One day a man came to me asking questions about Mr Lacey. He hinted that if I didn’t tell him what he wanted to know it would be bad for me.’

‘I see,’ said Biggles softly. ‘A threat, eh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you tell him anything?’

‘I told him the truth, which was I knew nothing about Mr Lacey. I only looked after his plane. What he did with it had nothing to do with me.’

‘Who was this man?’

‘I don’t know. I had never seen him before.’

‘Have you seen him since?’

‘Once or twice, in the distance.’

‘Was he a European or an Indian?’

‘I couldn’t be sure. He looked Indian, but he wore European clothes.’

‘What language did he speak?’

‘He spoke to me in Hindi, but he could also speak English.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because once, when unthinkingly I spoke in English he answered in English — or it might have been American.’

‘Would you know him if you saw him again?’

‘I think so. That is, if he was dressed the same way. He wore clothes like yours.’

Biggles was wearing a white linen suit.

He lit a cigarette and went on: ‘Now listen, Ram Singh, because this is very important. I want you to throw your mind back and try hard to think of anything Mr Lacey may have said to you, even as a joke. It might help us.’

Ram Singh searched his memory. ‘I remember one day, two or three weeks ago — and I think he was serious — he asked if I had ever noticed on the aerodrome a man with a wooden leg.’

Biggles’s eyebrows went up. ‘A wooden leg,’ he repeated.

‘Yes.’

‘Had you seen such a man?’

‘Not to my knowledge. How would I know if a man had a wooden leg? If it was what you call a peg leg, such as people have who can’t afford a proper artificial leg, I might have noticed it, although there are a lot of those in India. But if it was an imitation leg, made of wood, hidden, under trousers, I wouldn’t know anything about it.’

‘I can understand that,’ conceded Biggles. ‘To come back to the Hunter. Was it fitted with guns?’

‘Yes. I think it was a standard military Hunter fighter.’

‘Were the guns loaded?’

‘Yes.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I looked to see.’

‘Why?’

‘Curiosity, I suppose. I couldn’t imagine why Mr Lacey should want such a plane in India.’

Biggles half smiled. ‘Neither can I, if it comes to that. Up to this time he had done all his flying in the Auster, I suppose?’

‘Yes. He made many flights. Sometimes he was in the air a long time.’

‘And you have no idea where he went?’

‘No. He never told me where he had been except on one or two occasions when he said he was going to run down to Calcutta.’

‘How often did he fly?’

‘Nearly every day.’

‘I believe when he took off in the Hunter he headed north?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is that the direction he went in the Auster?’

‘Usually. I might say always, for as long as I could see him.’

‘Did he ever mention the Terai to you?’

‘Now you remind me, yes, he did. One day when we were talking he asked me if I had ever been to the Terai? Was the jungle there as bad as it was said to be?’

‘What did you answer?’

‘I had to tell him I didn’t know because I had never seen it. I knew of it only by reputation, which is bad.’

‘You’ve never flown over it?’

‘No. The only flights I have made since I came here were to Calcutta, when there was a spare seat in a plane going there.’

‘Did you ever fly with Mr Lacey in the Auster?’

‘No. He never invited me.’

‘Had he done so, would you have gone up with him?’

‘Of course. I love flying. One day, not long ago, when he was getting ready to fly, I did ask him if I could go with him.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He laughed and said I was safer on the ground.’

‘What did you take that to mean?’

‘I didn’t know. I thought it was another of his little jokes.’

‘Did anyone apart from you ever service the Auster when it was on the ground?’

‘No. My orders were to take good care of it.’

‘Orders from whom?’

‘Mr Akbar.’

‘Did anyone ever ask you to interfere with it... I mean, to cause a forced landing?’

Ram Singh looked horrified. ‘No.’

‘Did Mr Lacey carry any sort of weapon in the Auster — a rifle, for instance?’

‘I never saw one. Had one been there I’m sure I would have noticed it.’

‘Thank you, Ram Singh. Now I’d like to have a look at the Auster.’

‘Certainly. Please come with me.’

‘Has anyone else ever expressed a wish to look over the Auster?’

‘No.’

As they made their way along to the open doors of the hangar, a man, apparently an Indian by the way he was dressed, came out and walked away. His back was towards them, so they could not see his face. He had a slight limp and walked with the aid of a stick.

Biggles stopped short, a hand on Ram Singh’s arm. ‘Do you know that man?’ he asked tersely.

‘No.’

‘Could it be the man who asked you questions about Mr Lacey?’

‘I don’t think so, but without seeing his face I couldn’t be sure.’

Biggles frowned. ‘If he was standing just inside the hangar he could have overheard our conversation.’

‘It is possible.’

Said Biggles quickly to Bertie: ‘Watch where he goes. He might suffer from rheumatism. Again, he might have a wooden leg.’

Bertie walked on.

Biggles and Ram Singh went into the hangar and on to the far end where Algy’s Auster had been parked out of the way. With Ram Singh watching, Biggles made a thorough examination, inside and out. ‘It seems to be in good order,’ he observed, getting down from the cockpit where, unsuccessfully, he had looked for notes Algy may have made.

Bertie rejoined them.

‘Well?’ queried Biggles.

‘He had a car parked behind the main building. He drove off in it. I didn’t see his face. Not having a car I could do nothing more about it.’

‘What make was the car?’

‘I don’t know. It was too far off for me to see. It was a biggish car, an expensive-looking saloon.’

‘Did you get its registration?’

‘No. I don’t suppose I would have been able to read it, anyway. How about Algy’s Auster? Did you find anything wrong with it?’

‘Not exactly wrong. That is, I can see nothing to prevent it from flying. But there is one little thing that tells a story. Come round here.’

They went round to the far side of the aircraft. Without speaking Biggles pointed to a tiny hole, near the bottom of the cockpit, so small that only an

experienced eye would have noticed it.

Bertie pursed his lips. 'Great Scot,' he breathed. 'That's a bullet hole.'

Biggles nodded. 'It went right through. Had Algy been in the machine when it happened, and we must suppose he was, the shot must have come near to hitting him. Now we know why he went to Calcutta to borrow a Hunter. If there was to be any shooting he was going to take a hand in it. When he told Ram Singh someone would have to look out he wasn't joking. Well, there it is. Someone knew what Algy was doing and had a crack at him. The next time was successful. Algy was shot down. Anyhow, that's how it looks to me.'

Said Bertie, deadly serious: 'When this happened, they must have caught him napping.'

'Algy, not expecting anything like this, would probably be studying the ground. He was looking for something, although he may not have known exactly what it was.'

'Have you told Ram Singh about this?'

'No. Obviously he hasn't spotted this bullet hole. I wouldn't expect him to. We happen to have seen bullet holes before.'

'Are you going to report it?'

'No. Not yet, anyway. It would serve no useful purpose. The people we're up against would get to hear of it. It would be better not to let them know what we know now. We'll keep it to ourselves. Well, I think that's as much as we can do here.'

'What's our next move?'

'It's getting time we did a spot of flying. It's too late to start anything like that today, so it will have to be at sun-up in the morning, before it gets too hot.'

They rejoined Ram Singh, who had strolled to the door of the hangar. Biggles said to him: 'Thanks. That's all for now. We shall be seeing you again, tomorrow morning if you're early. We shall be here at dawn. In the meantime, if you happen to see a man with a wooden leg you might let us know at once.'

Ram Singh stared. 'Are you serious?'

'Certainly.'

'You think I might see such a man?'

'It wouldn't surprise me.'

'There are a lot of men in India with wooden legs.'

'I'm only interested in any you might see on the aerodrome. Don't on any account allow such a man to go near Mr Lacey's plane; or ours, for that matter.'

With that they left Ram Singh and walked on towards the rest-house.

'What do you make of him?' asked Bertie.

'I'd say he's all right, although at the moment I wouldn't trust anyone too far. If he isn't, we shall soon know.'

'And what about the manager here, Akbar?'

‘He impressed me favourably. We shall have to trust him, anyway, or we might as well pack up and go home. He could, if he felt like it, make it impossible for us to stay here.’

They walked on.

CHAPTER 4

A STRANGER OFFERS HIS SERVICES

Although the heat was of course oppressive, Biggles and Bertie found they had been given comfortable quarters at the rest-house, where their wants were attended to by a staff of quiet, immaculate, white-clad "boys". The rest-house, so called, was in fact a small modern hotel, built as a bungalow, with reserved accommodation for government officials. Apparently it had been decided they came into this category, for here they were given adjoining rooms, small but adequate. They appeared to have the place to themselves. Anyhow they saw no one in the lounge or at the bar. Later they had a light but enjoyable meal.

Before retiring for the night, taking their coffee to deck-chairs under the great Indian moon, out of earshot of possible eavesdroppers, they had a few last words about the business that had brought them to India, and their first day at Shara.

Bertie said, a trifle anxiously: 'I suppose it's safe to leave our machines unattended?'

Biggles lifted a shoulder. 'What else can we do? We can't sit up all night ourselves for an indefinite period; and I don't see how we can ask Mr Akbar to lay on a guard. It would imply that we didn't trust his security arrangements. We shall just have to take a chance, that's all.'

'What do you make of this talk of a man with a wooden leg?'

'No more than you. We can only suppose that one of Algy's suspects had an artificial leg. Presumably he thought he might turn up here or he wouldn't have spoken to Ram Singh about him. If we see such a man we'll have a long hard look at him; although, as Ram Singh remarked, if a man is wearing long trousers how can you tell what he has inside them? You can't go up to every man you see who walks with a limp and say: "Excuse me, but do you happen to have a wooden leg?"'

'It's strange that the only fellow we saw at the sheds, apart from the staff, walked with a limp.'

'That's why I asked you to keep an eye on him.'

'You thought he might have a wooden leg?'

'It seemed possible, if not probable.'

'He didn't look like an employee doing some sort of work, yet he appeared to be strolling about the airfield as he liked.'

'So what? This isn't London Airport or anything like it. We're in India, where life is taken a little more casually.'

Bertie changed the subject. 'What's the drill tomorrow?'

'Sitting here won't get us anywhere, that's certain. I've asked all the questions I can think of. The only thing left for us to do is a spot of aviation to the north of here to have a look at the sort of country Algy was flying over.'

North is a bit vague, I must admit, but it is at least a rough guide, which is a lot better than having no idea to which point of the compass Algy was pointing his nose. We can only assume that he traced the source of this smuggling racket to somewhere north of where we are sitting now. Why else would he have switched his operational base from Calcutta? He had nearly got the thing wrapped up. He told us so in his last letter. He was almost ready to come home. Something went wrong, and, as he didn't come back, he must now be on the carpet between here and the Himalayas. I can't see him being daft enough to cross the mountains to Tibet, which is now Chinese territory. If he did he's gone for good. Had he been forced down in Tibet, the Chinese government would have kicked up a stink before this, about the violation of their air space.'

'Pity he didn't tell someone what he knew,' said Bertie lugubriously.

'He wouldn't dare. Who could he trust? Gold is big business, and a little of it is enough to most men. Enough of the damned stuff will buy anyone. As a cynic once remarked, every man has his price. That's why international spy rings are able to operate successfully.' Biggles stubbed his cigarette. 'Well, I'm soon going to turn in, to be ready for an early start. Tomorrow will be another scorcher.'

'I suppose there's no doubt about the weather staying fair?'

'None whatever. That's one thing in India you can rely on. You don't need to be an expert to be a prophet. At this time of the year you know beyond a shadow of doubt that tomorrow will be another day just like today. The sun will go blazing across a sky without a cloud in sight. It'll do that the next day, and the next, and so on until the monsoon arrives with buckets of rain to give the thirsty ground more water than it can drink. That's no weather for flying, believe you me. In Bengal it comes from the north-east, starting usually in late May or early June.'

'Which means that we've got under a month to find Algy.'

'Less than that if the monsoon happens to play its trick of arriving before it's due. I can tell you this. If we haven't found him by the time the monsoon breaks we shall never find him. Rain and hail can knock holes in a light machine like the Auster, and finish it off by beating it down into the ground.'

'I suppose Algy would know that?'

'I sincerely hope so. That, I imagine, is why he pressed on to finish the job quickly. Now let's put in some blanket drill — not that we shall need any blankets.'

Bertie reached out to touch Biggles on the knee. 'Just a minute, old boy,' he murmured softly. 'I fancy we have a visitor. Anyhow, I see someone heading in our direction.' He was looking past Biggles's shoulder.

There was a pause. Biggles did not look round. Then a slim figure, moving slowly and silently, appeared beside them.

A softly modulated voice said, in perfect English, with no trace of accent. 'Good evening, gentlemen. Would you be so kind as to allow me to use your

table? A boy is bringing my coffee outside.’¹

‘Sit down,’ invited Biggles. ‘The table and chairs are not my property.’

‘Thank you so much.’ The speaker took a seat between them. He said no more until one of the rest-house boys had put his coffee on the table and, with a bow, withdrew. Then he remarked, ‘It is very hot tonight; I am sure you must find it so.’

To which Biggles replied, having moved his chair a few inches: ‘Not too hot for us. The English climate, as you may know, leaves much to be desired, for which reason we have for a long time scattered ourselves in other countries.’

‘Such as India.’

‘We were always partial to India.’

There was a pause while the newcomer sipped his coffee. He had chosen to sit with his back to the moon, so it was not easy to get a clear picture of his face. However, it could be seen that he was formally and immaculately dressed, black trousers, white jacket, black tie, giving the impression that he was an Indian of the upper class. A diamond sparkled on a finger of the hand that reached for the coffee. It was a beautiful hand, one that would have delighted an artist. The long slender fingers had obviously never known manual work.

‘I suppose you gentlemen are on a hunting trip,’ went on the self-invited guest.

‘Yes,’ answered Biggles, truthfully. He did not say what they were hunting. ‘Is that why you are here?’ he queried.

‘Oh dear no. Hunting has never appealed to me. It is far too uncomfortable. I am a business man forced to spend the night in this miserable place, having missed a connection to Calcutta yesterday. I am afraid there is room for improvement in our local air services. Am I mistaken or did I see you arrive in a plane — a small private plane?’

‘You might have done, since we arrived in one,’ admitted Biggles, lighting another cigarette. He offered his case, but it was waved aside.

‘No thank you. I don’t smoke. Pardon my curiosity, but how do you propose hunting in a plane, if it isn’t an impertinent question?’

‘We’re not likely to try shooting a tiger from the air, if that’s what you imagined. The purpose of the plane is to look over some ground before we start on foot, when we shall, I hope, have the services of a professional *shikari*.’²

‘Ah! There I may be able to help you. I know of just such a man.’

‘That’s very kind of you, but we have already made our arrangements,’ replied Biggles.

‘I wonder can I help you in the way of equipment — guns, rifles, camp gear, and that sort of thing? One of my companies is in that line of business.’

‘We’ve brought with us everything we’re likely to need,’ informed Biggles, his voice taking on a slightly cooler tone. ‘All the same,’ he went on,

‘if you would give us your card we could get into touch with you should we run into difficulties.’

After going through his pockets the stranger expressed regret that he had left his card case in another jacket, in his room.

‘No matter,’ said Biggles smoothly. ‘I can always get your name from the office. They must know you.’

‘Quite so — quite so.’ The speaker did not seem so sure of himself and changed the subject. ‘Shall I call for some more coffee?’

‘Not for me, thank you,’ declined Biggles. ‘I was about to retire when you joined us. To run away and leave you alone would have appeared discourteous.’

‘As you please. No doubt we shall meet again in the morning.’

‘Perhaps, but the time of our departure will depend on how I feel,’ replied Biggles easily. He got up. ‘Well, good night to you, and thanks for your offer of assistance.’

‘We shall probably meet again somewhere, if not tomorrow.’

‘I’m sure of it,’ answered Biggles. ‘To travellers like us the world is a small place.’ With that, he and Bertie strolled away in the direction of their quarters.

Not a word was spoken until they were well out of ear-shot. Then Bertie said softly. ‘What do you make of that joker? He wanted to know a lot.’

‘Naturally,’ replied Biggles dryly.

‘Why naturally?’

‘Because, unless I’m mistaken, that’s why he came here.’

‘What gives you that idea?’

‘For one thing he happens to have a wooden leg — or an artificial one of some sort.’

Bertie stopped short, staring. ‘Now how on earth do you know that?’

‘I suspected he was a phoney from the moment he joined us. No self-respecting Indian would have barged in as he did, without a very good reason — a more convincing one than he gave. You must have seen me move my chair closer to his. Didn’t you guess why?’

‘No, old boy. Dash it all, I’m not clairvoyant.’

‘Neither am I, but it was a fairly safe bet that we should encounter a man with a wooden leg if we stayed here long enough. I must admit it has happened rather sooner than I expected. Someone suspicious of us was soon on the job. I moved to get within touching distance. I tapped his leg with the toe of my shoe. He didn’t feel it. Had he done so he would have moved, probably looked at me. From that I could draw only one conclusion. I can’t say I was particularly surprised. Someone, possibly the man who saw us talking to Ram Singh at the sheds, lost no time in informing his boss of our arrival. He came along to look us over. At least, that’s how it seems to me. What he said about missing his connection was all hooley. He’s only just arrived. I’d wager he came here in a car from somewhere not too far away.’

Let's go round by the car park and check if I'm right.'

They made a detour round the place reserved for cars.

There were only two cars there, which simplified matters. One, as Biggles remarked, belonged to Mr Akbar, the manager. Biggles put a hand on the radiator cap of the other, a Daimler, and removed it quickly. 'Still warm,' he said. 'Must have arrived within the last hour. She'd cool slowly in this weather. I'd say this is it. Our friend seems to have plenty of money. I'm surprised he hasn't a chauffeur. Maybe he has one; but he wouldn't wait here with the car if his boss intends to stay the night.'

'How's this going to affect us — if you see what I mean?' asked Bertie seriously.

'One thing it means is, we shall have to watch every step before we take it, in a manner of speaking. This fellow who's been talking to us wasn't inspired by amiability, or anything like that. He came here to look us over and try to find out what we're doing here. Maybe he knows, or has guessed. Someone was quick off the mark to tip him off that we'd arrived.'

'He seemed anxious to help us.'

'Too anxious. People don't go up to strangers and say, can I do anything for you? Ask yourself, why should he put himself to the slightest inconvenience on our behalf? He overdid it. He offered to find us a good *shikari*. I may be doing him an injustice, but I'd be sorry to go into the jungle with anyone he recommended. What position he holds in the organization that plotted Algy's disappearance I wouldn't try to guess. It doesn't matter. I feel it in my bones that we're up against a bunch of racketeers who will stop at nothing. That's probably why Algy didn't dare to commit anything to paper. If they've got him, as soon as they're sure we're friends of his, here to find out what happened, they'll do their best to get us, too. There may be no immediate cause for alarm, although we'd be stupid to take chances. We should be away in the morning before our friend wakes up. Unless he has a private plane handy, he wouldn't be able to follow us, anyway.'

While talking they had strolled slowly on to the rest-house. The heat discouraged haste. The boy who had served coffee — actually he was about eighteen — was still on duty, sitting relaxed in a long chair. He got up when they entered.

Biggles said: 'The gentleman outside. We've been talking, but I forgot to ask him his name. Do you know it?'

The boy's face went blank. 'No, sir. I have never seen him before.'

'But didn't he stay here last night?'

The boy's face remained inscrutable. 'I don't know, sir. I wasn't here.'

'Never mind,' returned Biggles casually. 'We shall see him in the morning, no doubt. What time did he ask to be called?'

'I have had no orders, sir. Do you wish to be called?'

'No, thanks. We may sleep late. We'll let you know when we're ready for our morning tea.'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Our keys, please.’

The boy took them from the key rack and handed them over.

Biggles and Bertie walked on down the corridor to their rooms, which were at the far end. ‘Come in here a minute,’ said Biggles, opening his own door. ‘That boy may be telling the truth or he may not. I rather fancy he is. He doesn’t know anything. He’s merely been told not to talk. I don’t think our friend outside can be staying the night here or his key, unless he has it in his pocket, would be on the rack. The only keys were ours, so it looks as if we’re the only people staying here.’

‘What do you make of that chap?’

‘He’s a not uncommon cosmopolitan type. He could have been born anywhere in the world. He may not know his ancestry. I’ve had dealings with some of them. They can be good or bad. Some are clever enough to live in luxury without appearing to do any work. You’ll find them wherever there’s money. They’re not interested in anything else. The world is their oyster. London, Paris, New York, Monte Carlo, Switzerland, Cairo and the Middle East, it’s all the same to them. When they’re bad they become international crooks and spies. Owing allegiance to no one, they’re not troubled by conscience. I’d say his passport would make interesting reading.’

While speaking, Biggles had unzipped his light travelling bag and examined the contents. ‘No one has touched my kit, anyway,’ he went on, taking out his pyjamas. He looked up at Bertie. ‘You realize we’re faced with a bit of a problem?’

‘Problem, old boy? What is it?’

‘This is a bungalow. If we sleep with our windows closed we’re liable to suffocate in this heat. The room will get like a Turkish bath. If we leave them open there’s nothing to prevent anyone stepping in from outside and doing us a mischief.’

‘You really think that might happen?’

‘I don’t know. I’m only saying it *could* happen. Certain people know we’re here and have probably guessed why. That was unavoidable. Maybe I’m getting over-sensitive, but I don’t feel like putting myself at their mercy. We can lock our doors, but I shan’t sleep comfortably with the window wide open.’

‘What’s the answer? I mean to say, we shall have to get some shut-eye or I shan’t be at my best and brightest at sparrow-chirp.’

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘Just a minute,’ he said, ‘I’ve got an idea.’ He went out.

¹ In case the reader may think it odd that in India so many people should speak English, it had better be said here that almost all educated Indians (and Pakistanis) speak English fluently. Most of the ordinary people have at least enough English to get along. Only in remote rural areas is one likely to find people who speak only their own local language, whatever that may be. It must be remembered that although the national language is Hindi (which Biggles,

having been born in the country, is able to speak) there are fourteen major languages and over a hundred dialects used according to the district in which one happens to have been born.

2 A hunter.

CHAPTER 5

DARK WORK IN THE NIGHT

Biggles was away for a few minutes. When he came back he said: 'I've had a look at some of the other rooms near us. They're not occupied. The beds aren't made up and there's no luggage. That can only mean they're not being used. You please yourself what you do, but I feel inclined to switch to one of them, bearing in mind that the fellow who spoke to us outside knows which rooms we've been given.'

'How would he know that? Ask the boy on duty?'

'There'd be no need for that. As we're the only people here, he'd merely have to look at the key-rack to see our numbers.'

'Of course. I didn't think of that.'

'I shall go to the room next but one. It's a double, so you can join me if you like.'

'That's not a bad scheme. Let's do that,' agreed Bertie. 'If there's any trouble one of us should wake up. I'm not all that crazy about fresh air, but I must say I don't feel like stewing in my own juice all night behind a closed window.'

'Nor I.' Biggles went over to his bed, stripped off the sheet, arranged the bolster and pillow lengthways and replaced the sheet to give the impression that the bed was occupied. 'That should fool anyone who decides to play Peeping Tom,' he observed. 'You might do the same thing in your room.'

'I will.'

In Bertie's room the same procedure was followed. 'Sleep well, old chap,' said Bertie, giving the dummy sleeper a parting pat. This done, taking their pyjamas they went along to the double room Biggles had mentioned. 'We won't switch on the light, it would be seen from outside,' he said. The bright moonlight pouring in gave all the light that was necessary.

They had started to undress when the sound of a car engine being started took them to the window which, as it happened, overlooked the open area used as a car park. In the silvery light of the moon a white-jacketed figure could be seen in the driving seat of the Daimler. The car moved off and presently disappeared down the dusty approach road to the airfield.

'It looks as if our inquisitive friend doesn't intend to stay the night here, after all,' observed Biggles. 'I suspect he never had the slightest intention of doing that. If nothing worse he's a glib liar, although not a very convincing one. Well, that's all to the good. At least we shan't be worried by him. Now, as we're going to make an early start, we'd better turn in.'

They lay on their respective beds.

Bertie was fairly tired and expected to fall asleep at once without any difficulty; but this did not happen. For a long time he lay still with his eyes

closed, but it was no use, and eventually he reached the stage when, as sometimes happens, he realized that while courting sleep he was becoming more wide awake. It may have been the heat that affected him, for although the window was open the room was like an oven. Even lying motionless, his pyjamas were damp with perspiration. Or it may have been his brain was too active, going over the events of the day.

The only sound was the regular breathing from the other bed telling him that Biggles had not shared his sleeplessness.

Finally he decided there was only one thing to do, and that was make a break and start afresh. It sometimes works. Without a sound, anxious not to disturb Biggles, who was a light sleeper, he got off the bed and stepped softly to a chair by the window. It was a cane chair and it creaked a little as he lowered himself into it; but Biggles appeared not to hear it. Actually, it was no cooler by the open window, but at least he had something to look at, to take his mind off other matters.

It was a perfect night; dead still, without sound or movement, as if the world had died. A solemn hush hung over a picture of blue-white light in which every object cast a shadow as black as tar. The moon, a huge globe of shining silver, dominated a cloudless sky, paling the stars near it to insignificance. The stiff pointed leaves of a hedge of aloes stood dark, silhouetted like a frieze of bayonets. Once in a while a strange unrecognizable aroma invaded the sultry atmosphere. Mr Akbar's car stood where he had last seen it. Apparently it was left there all night.

How long Bertie sat there gazing out at nothing in particular he did not know. He took no account of time. There was really nothing to engage his attention, and it may have been this that had the effect he desired. He became drowsy. He yawned.

He was on the point of getting up and returning to his bed when for the first time a movement caught his eye. It was so insignificant that in the ordinary way it would not have been noticed, but in a scene so static, any moving object inevitably became conspicuous. It appeared as a small whitish-grey thing close against the inky outline of the aloes which fringed the far side of the car park. He watched it curiously, wondering what it could be. He was not thinking of anything as large as a human being. It was too big to be a moth, although he had seen some big ones. Its movement was not the erratic flight of a moth, anyway; nor of a bird, for that matter. He could only conclude it was an animal of some sort, possibly a pariah-dog, a jackal, or even a monkey, tame or wild.

He was not particularly interested, but he continued to watch from pure curiosity. That the object might in any way have any connection with him did not cross his mind. That came presently, when the creature — for it was obviously something alive — moved along a boundary of straggling palmettos. There was a gap. As the object of his scrutiny crossed it, it cast a shadow, and he realized suddenly it was a man. The light-coloured object was

a loincloth on a dark-skinned body. Its stealthy approach at once assumed a more sinister aspect.

Suddenly, after a curious movement, the loin-cloth was no longer there. At all events Bertie lost sight of it, although there was no question of seeing a dark body against a black background. This rather worried him, because when last seen the man appeared to be making his way towards the back of the bungalow from which Bertie was watching. His eyes explored the shadows without finding what they sought. Was the man a common thief or had he a definite purpose in mind? he pondered. He considered walking along the corridor and warning the man on night duty that he might have an undesirable visitor.

The incident had again banished sleep, but he decided he might as well go back to bed. Before doing so he leaned forward for a last look round. This brought his head just outside the window frame and gave him a view not to be seen from the inside; that is, along the back of the hotel. As this was in the full light of the moon, he did not expect to see the nocturnal prowler there: but he did. At all events, a creature looking more like a large monkey than a man was gliding, bent double, along the wall towards the bedrooms, making no more, noise than a passing shadow.

This re-aroused Bertie's apprehension. What struck him as odd, he could no longer see the light-coloured object, which he had taken to be a loin-cloth such as some natives wear, that had first attracted his attention. There could be only one answer to that, he reasoned. The man had taken it off. Why? The answer to that was equally obvious. He had discarded the garment to be free of any possible encumbrance. If this was correct, it followed that he was up to no good.

Of course, Bertie was still uncertain of the man's objective, and therefore of what his purpose might be. Yet where could he be going at that hour in a manner so furtive? He watched to see. There was still no indication that he and Biggles might be the object of this questionable performance. But when the slinking figure stopped, close to the ground, under the windows of the rooms he and Biggles should have occupied — without putting his head out farther he could not see which one — he was no longer in any doubt. He decided it was time Biggles knew what was going on.

He withdrew to Biggles's bed and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Biggles was up in a flash. 'What—'

'Ssh. I think we have a visitor.'

'Where is he? What's he doing?' Biggles got quickly off the bed.

'It's a native type. I watched him arrive. The last I saw of him he was crouching under the windows of our proper rooms as if he intended getting in.'

A few quick steps took Biggles to the window. He inched an eye forward. 'I can't see him.'

'Then he must have gone in. What shall we do?'

‘Nothing.’

‘*Nothing*? Are you going to let him get away with it?’

‘With what? There’s nothing for him to get away with.’

‘You’re not going to grab him?’

‘Not me.’ Biggles was emphatic.

Still watching, a moment later he went on: ‘There he goes. Running like a scared rabbit.’ Standing up, he stepped back.

‘He went into your room, or mine, and you’ve let the blighter go,’ accused Bertie.

‘Why not? He hasn’t done us any harm. We brought our kit in here with us, so he can’t have stolen anything. Why make a fuss? What would you have done?’

‘Collared him and asked him what the devil he was up to.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘Forget it. I’m afraid you still have one or two things to learn about the way this sort of thuggery is done here. Have you ever tried to hold a live eel fresh out of the water?’

‘No, but I’ve held live fish — or tried to.’

‘That would be easy compared with trying to get a grip on the slippery customer who has just paid us a visit. Knowing what he was going to do, he’d start by oiling himself from head to foot. You can’t do much with a greasy body — unless you shoot him. Had we tried we should have created a disturbance for no purpose; the rat would have got away, probably leaving one of us with a knife in the ribs.’

‘I wonder what he wanted?’

‘I’ll give you one guess. Let’s go and see. He’ll be clear away by now. By the way, did you notice if he carried a bag?’

‘Bag? No. Well, I didn’t see one. Why?’

‘He’d need a bag if he had ideas of making us a present of a snake, a *krait* or a cobra, for instance.’

‘That’s a nice thought, I must say,’ muttered Bertie, aghast. ‘Do you think he might have done that?’

‘It’s possible, although, as I say, he’d need a bag to carry the brute. As a murder weapon a snake has advantages over a knife in that the death of the victim could look like an accident. It can happen almost anywhere at any time. About ten thousand people die in India every year from snake bite. But a man found with a dagger wound is a different matter. You can’t make that look like an accident. Let’s go along to check the method our visitor employed. He wouldn’t use a gun. It makes too much noise.’

They went out to the corridor and stopped at the first of the rooms they should have occupied. It was Bertie’s. Biggles opened the door cautiously and, without crossing the threshold, by reaching in switched on the light. Without moving, their eyes explored the floor and the bed. They could see no snake and nothing appeared to have been disturbed.

‘I don’t think he came here,’ said Biggles. ‘He must have gone into my

room and that was enough.'

They withdrew, closing the door, and went along to what should have been Biggles's room. The same procedure was followed. A search revealed no sign of a snake. At first glance nothing appeared to have been touched, but Biggles nudged Bertie and pointed to his bed. Towards the top end there was a conspicuous depression in the sheet that covered the dummy. Without a word Biggles pulled it off and, holding it up to the light, put a finger through a clean cut about two inches long. An inspection of the bolster showed a similar slit.

'See what I mean,' murmured Biggles.

Bertie looked shocked. 'My sainted aunt! Had you been sleeping in that bed you'd have had it. Now we know what that devil came to do.'

Biggles nodded. 'They haven't wasted any time.'

'Why did he leave me alone?'

'Had he got me, he wouldn't have left you alone for long,' returned Biggles grimly. 'It's plain to see what happened here. That murdering thug came to my room first. He got in and did his dirty work. When he struck he must have realized he'd stuck his knife into a dummy. There's a lot of difference in the feel of a bolster and a human body. He would suspect a trap had been laid for him. That's why he departed in such a hurry without stopping to call on you.'

'He'll have to tell the man who paid him to do the job that he'd failed.'

'If I know anything he'll tell him nothing of the sort. He'd be too scared of what might happen to him.'

'So the gang may think we've been — er — accounted for?'

'Probably. When we show up in the morning they'll wonder what went wrong. We might turn this to our advantage.'

'How?'

'By watching people's faces. Keep an eye open for anyone who looks surprised when we appear our usual carefree selves.'

'Aren't you going to report this?'

'What's the use? What could we say? What could anyone do about it even if our story was believed? There isn't a hope of catching that devil who came here. We couldn't identify him, anyway. No, we'll let it pass. It's better that way. Let the people responsible try to work out why we're still on our feet.'

'Could the man who came here with a knife be the fellow who spoke to us last night?'

'No. He wasn't that sort. He was the type who pays someone else to take the risks. Besides, the man who spoke to us had a light skin.'

'True enough. I've been thinking about him. Could he be a Parsee?'

'No. Parsees keep themselves to themselves. I can't see one engaging himself in a smuggling racket. Most of them are educated men and well off. Some, in big business, are millionaires. Comparatively speaking they're a small group, so they can afford to help each other. I fancy the man who spoke to us was a Eurasian — half European, half Asian. That would account for his

light skin. Parsees have lightish skins because they're not truly Indians. They came to India long ago from Persia. But let's not stand here nattering. It's time we got some sleep. We've had a demonstration of the sort of people Algy was up against. Let's not forget it.'

'You don't think that assassin will come back?'

'Not tonight. He must have had a fright when he found he was knifing an empty bed. Make a note of this, though. He knew which rooms to come to. How did he know? Obviously, someone must have told him. Who? That's something we don't know — yet.'

They returned to their double room.

'It seems to me, old boy,' said Bertie as he got into bed, 'that had I come here on my own I would have lasted about five minutes.'

'It so happens that I was born in India — remember?' returned Biggles. 'Now go to sleep.'

CHAPTER 6

FIRST FLIGHT

The sky was still pink with the first flush of dawn when, the following morning, Biggles and Bertie made their way along the corridor to the lounge for whatever was available in the way of breakfast. They had returned their luggage, what little they had, to the rooms that had been allotted to them, leaving the one they had occupied as if it had not been used.

‘Watch the boy’s face when he sets eyes on us,’ said Biggles softly, as they drew near. ‘That should tell us if he knew anything about what was afoot last night.’

It happened that the young waiter who had served them overnight was not in his usual place. Apparently he had been relieved by another, a much older man. He was of course an Indian, dressed in the orthodox fashion. He was walking up and down, slowly, head bent, his hands clasped behind his back, his whole attitude being that of a man with a problem on his mind. Hearing them coming, he looked round. He stopped. He turned. He stood still. He stared.

Biggles did not appear to notice anything unusual in this. Speaking casually, he merely said: ‘We’d like a pot of tea, please, and something to eat if it isn’t too early.’

The man put his hands together in front of him and bowed obsequiously. ‘Yes, sahib,’ he said.

Biggles walked on to the lounge and with Bertie sat at a small table.

‘Well?’ Bertie’s eyes asked a question.

‘I’d say he knows all about it — or at least he knew some devilment was afoot, if not exactly what it was. We shall soon see if I’m right.’

‘How?’

‘We’ll see how long it takes him to bring the tea. He may be some time.’

‘Why?’

‘Because, unless I’m mistaken, before he does anything else he’ll get on the phone to someone to say we’re here, asking for breakfast.’

Bertie half rose. ‘I might be able to check that.’

‘I don’t think it’s necessary.’

‘If he’s on the phone I might hear what he says.’

‘You wouldn’t understand if you did. He won’t speak English. He’ll probably talk in Hindi.’

‘Pity we couldn’t get a hint of who he’s getting in touch with.’

‘If I’m any good at guessing we shall soon know.’

‘You think it might be our friend of last night?’

‘If so he’ll tell us soon enough.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘My dear Bertie, if that man is told we are still on our feet in spite of what happened last night, if he had anything to do with it he’ll be along hot foot to see for himself, wondering what the devil went wrong.’

‘Then what?’

Biggles shrugged and lit a cigarette. ‘Let’s wait and see. If he comes it’ll be interesting to hear what he has to say. You’ll notice that fellow hasn’t brought our tea, so it begins to look as if I might be right. He’s had ample time to boil a kettle of water.’

‘What do you make of all this?’

‘It might be a good sign.’

‘How do you work that out?’

‘Somebody doesn’t want us here. It must be known *why* we’re here, and it may well be that someone thinks we might succeed in finding out what happened to Algy.’

‘Seriously, old boy, what do you reckon the odds against us finding Algy’s Hunter?’

‘That depends on where it came down. I don’t know this part of India, but from what I saw coming here it’s much as I expected. It falls into three groups — forest, jungle and cultivated land... paddy fields and the like. If Algy came down in forest or jungle, I can understand why he hasn’t been found. In that case it’s likely he never will be found, because the local people have no reason to go into such places, except on the outskirts, near the villages, to collect firewood or grass for fodder for their animals. Then several go together, working on the principle that if there’s a bad tiger or leopard about, he gets the other man, not you. After all, they don’t have rifles.’

‘Neither have we, if it comes to that.’

‘I hope we shan’t need them. Had Algy come down in open country, where there are always people about, it’s almost certain the machine would have been seen by someone, in which case it would have been reported.’

‘What you’re really saying is, you think the Hunter must have crashed in forest or jungle.’

‘Fraid so, or in the tall grass you find near water; grass or bamboo. Our real snag is the area of the ground we have to cover. Take the Terai alone. I don’t know who measured it, but it’s said to be about five hundred miles long and twelve wide. If my arithmetic is any good that adds up to six thousand square miles, and Algy might be in any one of them. The ground will have to be searched thoroughly, and from a low altitude, or we’d be wasting our time. It’s going to take some days to cover all that. Still, we’re not pressed for time, although obviously we can’t stay here indefinitely, even if the people we’re up against were prepared to allow us to do that, which it seems they are not. However, we’ll see how it goes.’

Biggles was right about the delay in serving breakfast. It must have been nearly twenty minutes before the waiter reappeared with a tray. He put it on the table and withdrew. He did not speak, but his eyes were eloquent with

anxiety.

After he had gone Biggles said: 'I'd make a small bet he's on their pay roll, if only as a very small fish. It's likely his job is simply to report everything that happens here. Remember, from the fact that Algy moved his quarters to here, we can only conclude that we're not far from the smuggling trail, if not actually on it. In plain English, this, as we may judge from what happened last night, is a hotspot, in more senses than one. I don't care a damn about the smugglers. I'm only concerned with Algy.'

Bertie finished his tea. 'I thought we were going to make an early start. Isn't it about time we got airborne?'

'Sit still a minute. We're not in all that hurry. It's worth waiting a few minutes to see this through. Never miss a chance to learn something. Hark! I don't think we shall have to wait much longer.'

From somewhere not far away came the sound of a car approaching fast. It stopped. A car door slammed. Footsteps grated on the dusty gravel outside. Then came voices in low tones from the entrance hall.

Biggles stubbed his cigarette and lit another. 'He's asking where we are,' he murmured. 'We shall soon know who it is.'

The voices stopped. Footsteps came nearer. Then a voice said brightly: 'Ah! Good morning, gentlemen. So there you are. I trust you had a comfortable night, and slept well.'

There was no mistaking the voice of the man who had spoken to them the previous evening.

'Quite comfortable, thank you,' replied Biggles smoothly. 'Any reason why we shouldn't?'

'No. Of course not; not as far as I know,' was the quick answer.

Bertie felt inclined to say, then why ask the question? But he kept his mouth shut, and for the first time in daylight he had a good look at the speaker. He decided Biggles was probably right. The man was a Eurasian. A slight slant in his eyes suggested Far Eastern blood. He was unshaven, as if he had left his bed in a hurry, wherever it might have been.

'Sit down and have a cup of tea,' invited Biggles.

'No thanks. I've just had breakfast.'

'I thought you told us you were spending the night here, at the rest-house,' went on Biggles, stirring his tea.

'That was my intention, but I had a phone call from the town, from a friend of mine — purely business. We talked until late and I spent the night at his house.'

'What time does your plane leave?'

'There's some doubt about that. I understand it has been delayed *en route* with engine trouble. I shall just have to wait here till it comes. I thought you were leaving early?'

'I hope to do that, but a cup of tea was indicated. We shall be leaving in a minute or two, Mister — er — I don't think you told me your name. I should

have got it from one of the staff. How stupid of me.'

The man hesitated, just long enough to suggest he could not find an excuse on the spur of the moment for not answering the direct question. 'Larta,' he said. 'Holman Larta. My father was English. Does that surprise you?'

'No. Why should it?'

'When my father died, some years ago, I took my mother's surname for business reasons. It is a name well known in India.'

'Well, I hope you don't have to wait too long for your plane, Mr Larta.' Biggles got up. 'Now we must be on our way before the sun gets any higher. Good day to you. We may meet again.'

'I hope so. What time do you expect to be back?'

'I've no idea. It depends on how we get on.'

Mr Larta smiled. 'Don't overdo it. This is not a good country for emergency landings.'

'I've flown in India before,' returned Biggles cheerfully. 'Goodbye for now.'

'Well, what do you make of him after all that?' queried Bertie, as they walked towards the hangar.

'For the moment I'm keeping an open mind about him,' replied Biggles thoughtfully. 'I'd be sorry to do him an injustice. We still have no proof that he was concerned with last night's affair, although we have reason to be suspicious. Still, suspicion isn't proof. I don't like the man. That half condescending, ingratiating manner of his, rubs me the wrong way. If he was responsible for setting that cut-throat on to us he must be wondering how it is we're still alive. But he didn't show it.'

'Do you believe that line about his father being English?'

'Why not? From his appearance and the way he speaks it could well be. If it's true, his father wouldn't be the first Englishman to marry an Indian girl.'

'Why should he change his name?'

'If his mother had money it could have been part of a marriage settlement. But we're not concerned with his ancestry. I take men as I find them.'

'All the same, it's a bit disconcerting to have him hanging about watching us, because that's what he's doing.'

'I must agree it looks that way, but there's nothing we can do about it. It means we shall have to be as cagey as an old cock sparrow looking at what he suspects is a trap.'

'He'll be watching to see which direction we take when we leave the ground.'

'I shall keep it in mind and see that he doesn't learn much from that. If he's after our blood no doubt he'll go on watching. We've several days' work ahead of us. Ram Singh must be on the job; I see he has had our machine pulled out ready. Good. That will save time.'

'You trust him?'

'So far we've no reason to distrust him.'

‘How do we know he hasn’t interfered with our machine? We can’t do a complete overhaul every day before we take off.’

‘Just how far we can trust that young man I shall know in about five minutes.’

‘How?’

‘By pulling the old trick they used to play in the RFC, in the early days of flying, when they had reason to suspect a mechanic wasn’t doing his job thoroughly. I shall invite Ram Singh to fly with us. If he gets into the aircraft you can be sure all is well; if he knows something is wrong we shan’t see him for dust. That’s a good way to keep your fitter or rigger up to the mark — knowing he may be on board when the machine takes off. No man in his right mind would get into an aircraft if he has the slightest reason to think something may come unstuck.’

Ram Singh was waiting by the Auster to greet them. He saluted, British fashion.

‘Everything all right?’ questioned Biggles.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘All topped up and ready to go?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Biggles smiled. ‘How would you like to fly with us? There’s plenty of room.’

Ram Singh’s eyes opened wide, glowing. ‘You really mean that, sir?’

‘Of course.’

‘How wonderful! There’s nothing I would like more. Will you excuse me a minute while I ask the Superintendent if it’s all right with him?’

‘Certainly. Go ahead. Be as quick as you can.’

Ram Singh ran off.

Biggles looked at Bertie with a half smile. ‘If there’s anything wrong with this machine we can be quite certain he knows nothing about it,’ he asserted.

‘Jolly good,’ answered Bertie. ‘It’s a relief to know that. It’s a treat to know there is someone in this bally place whom we can trust.’

Ram Singh came running back, a broad smile on his face. ‘I may go,’ he cried delightedly.

‘Good,’ said Biggles. ‘You’re not afraid to fly with a stranger?’

‘Not with a *pukka* pilot like you, sir.’

‘Who told you I was a *pukka* pilot?’

‘Mr Akbar, when he put your plane in my charge.’

‘And who told him?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps someone in Calcutta, when he was told you were coming here.’

‘So you knew I was coming?’

‘Yes.’

‘I see.’ Biggles cocked an eyebrow at Bertie. ‘We seem to have had a lot of advance publicity, although I asked for our coming here to be kept quiet.’ To

Ram Singh he went on: 'You'll sit behind us. But before we take off I must have a word with you in confidence. You know what I mean by that?'

'Yes. In secret.'

'You can call it that. You know why I'm here?'

'You came to look for Mr Lacey.'

That's right. I shall fly low so you can help us to look for him. If you see anything on the ground looking like a wrecked plane keep your eyes on it and touch me on the shoulder.'

'I'll do that, sir.'

'Then let's get away.'

In the aircraft, with his eyes on the instrument panel, Biggles ran up the engine. He tried the controls. Satisfied, he took off, and holding the machine low, headed west.

'Why this way, old boy?' queried Bertie.

'Only to fool anyone who happens to be watching,' answered Biggles.

He held the course for a few minutes and then swung round to the north.

Before them now lay a typical Indian panorama, mostly flat with areas of indifferent cultivation broken here and there by trees or patches of scrub where apparently the soil for some reason was not worth working. The roads were dusty tracks with an occasional pedestrian or bullock cart. There were very few people working in the fields. Ahead, in the far distance, the tops of snow-capped giants of the Himalayas hung in the sky like anchored clouds, their bases fading into a murky, colourless heat haze.

'We needn't waste time on open ground or near villages,' remarked Biggles. 'We'll concentrate on any *nullahs*, broken or wooded country. We're bound to strike some. Broadly speaking, I shall make for the eastern end of the Terai, but we shan't be able to cover much of the actual Terai today. We'll do as much as we can.'¹

He flew on. Bertie and Singh kept a close lookout.

Of the flight that followed there is little to tell. It was a routine of a sort Biggles and Bertie knew well. They had been doing it on and off for years. It may as well be said at once that as far as their mission was concerned it was a failure. They saw nothing of interest, certainly nothing resembling the object for which they were searching.

By flying a meandering course to take in all rough ground, sometimes circling low, they were two hours reaching the southern boundary of the notorious Terai. They saw little of it, only enough to show them what it was really like; and this did nothing to raise their hopes, for it was at once apparent that the chances of finding an object the size of an aircraft, even if there: was one there, in such a sea of almost unbroken jungle, were remote. Where there were trees, it was of course impossible to see below the upper branches. Nearly as bad were areas of bamboo and *lantana*, a rambling shrub that forms dense thickets of considerable extent.

Apart from the riotous vegetation, the place appeared to be dead. The only

sign of life to be seen were some vultures that decorated — if that is the right word — the branches of a leafless tree. ‘There’s probably carrion of some sort near that tree, or those stinking birds wouldn’t be there,’ remarked Biggles, trying in vain to see the attraction.

Even though he had not seriously expected to find Algy’s machine on this their first trip, he admitted it was disheartening to be faced with such almost impossible conditions. However, on their next effort, by flying straight out, not having to bother with the intervening ground, they would be able to devote more time to the Terai itself. Unwilling to cut his endurance limit too fine, he turned for home.

The return journey was uneventful. They landed hot and tired to find Mr Akbar standing by the hangar. After the Auster had been put away — Biggles telling Ram Singh he would be along later — the aerodrome manager called Biggles to one side.

‘Come here,’ he said darkly. ‘I want a word with you. Tell me, did anything happen here last night?’

Biggles looked surprised; or rather, he affected surprise. ‘Why do you ask that?’

‘There’s a funny atmosphere about the place today, the sort that usually means somebody has done something he shouldn’t. I can smell it. I’ve asked questions, but of course nobody knows anything.’

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ returned Biggles casually. ‘If there is anything wrong it’ll come out sooner or later. It usually does. I can assure you that as far as we’re concerned everyone has been most helpful. We’re being well looked after.’

‘Well, I’m glad to hear that,’ declared Mr Akbar. ‘If you have any trouble let me know.’

‘I will,’ promised Biggles.

‘How did you get on today?’

‘No luck.’

‘I see you took young Ram Singh with you.’

‘Yes. He’s dead keen on flying, and as there was plenty of room we took him along. He’s a nice lad.’

‘I’m glad you like him. Well, you’ll be wanting some lunch, so I won’t keep you. I may see you later.’ Mr Akbar walked away.

Biggles and Bertie went on to the rest-house.

¹ For those who like technical details, the type of Auster Biggles was flying was the J.I Autocrat. It has a top speed of 120 m.p.h. Cruising speed 100 m.p.h. In still air, with a long-range tank, it has an endurance of 600 miles. In present conditions it would use nearly five gallons of petrol an hour. Its ceiling is 15,000 feet. To Biggles, for Air Police work, the advantage of this type over faster machines lay in a short landing run — well under 100 yards. Which means that in the hands of a skilful pilot it can be put down on a very small piece of open ground.

CHAPTER 7

AKBAR ASKS QUESTIONS

After lunch Biggles and Bertie retired to the veranda for a rest before taking a shower and changing their clothes for the evening. They had started the day early, and the long flight, in a light plane, in bumpy conditions under a scorching sun, had left them somewhat weary. They had not seen Mr Holman Larta so assumed he had left. They did not trouble to inquire.

After a look round to make sure he could not be overheard, Bertie said: 'This business last night. Do you think it will be repeated?'

'Probably,' answered Biggles calmly. 'Perhaps not in the same way. If they're so anxious to stop us, now they see we're still on our feet, I imagine they're almost certain to try something.'

'What I don't like is the thought they might tamper with our aircraft,' went on Bertie, looking worried. 'As far as I can see, there's nothing to prevent someone getting at the Auster. You realize the hangars aren't locked at night. Ram Singh told me the doors are only closed during the monsoon.'

'I've been thinking about that, too,' returned Biggles. 'We shall have to do something about it.'

'But what can we do? We can't fly all day and sit up all night — if you see what I mean.'

'I wasn't thinking of that.'

'What else can we do?'

'We shall have to get someone else to keep guard.'

'Such as whom?'

'It will have to be someone we can trust. Ram Singh, for instance. I'm sure he's to be trusted. The more I see of that lad the more I like him.'

'But he can't work twenty-four hours a day any more than we can.'

'I wouldn't ask him to try. He might sleep in the machine. He'd wake up if anyone started tinkering with it. I don't know where he sleeps in the ordinary way. We'll find out. I'll speak to him about it later on.'

At this point of the conversation Mr Akbar appeared. 'Ah! So there you are,' he said. 'I've been looking for you.'

'No trouble, I hope,' rejoined Biggles.

'I'm not so sure about that.'

'Have you found the reason for the peculiar atmosphere you mentioned when we landed?'

'Possibly. I thought you might be able to help me. That's why I was looking for you. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I wonder if you'd come with me? I shall only keep you a minute or two.'

'Certainly.' Biggles raised himself from the long cane chair in which he had been reclining.

‘How many people besides me know the real reason why you’re here?’ inquired Akbar.

‘That’s what I’d like to know myself,’ replied Biggles, dryly.

‘I suspect someone knew why Mr Lacey was here.’

‘There’s no doubt about that.’

Mr Akbar dropped his voice. ‘The gold smuggling business.’

Biggles nodded.

‘If they know you’re here for the same reason they might try to dispose of you, too.’

‘We took that into account when we started, although as a matter of fact I don’t give two hoots about the smuggling angle. I came here in the hope — a forlorn one you may think — of finding Lacey, or learning what happened to him. As I told you when I arrived, he happens to be a personal friend of ours.’

‘He was a police officer.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Come with me. I want to show you something.’

They followed the manager down the corridor to the sleeping quarters of the rest-house. Mr Akbar stopped at the door of Biggles’s room, opened it, beckoned and went in. Biggles and Bertie followed. Mr Akbar walked over to the bed, pulled off the sheet and with a curious expression on his face put two fingers through the knife cut. He raised the bolster and pointed to the slit.

Looking Biggles straight in the face, he said: ‘Did you sleep in this bed last night?’

To a straight question Biggles could only give a straight answer. ‘No.’

‘Why not?’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘I thought it might be — well — er — dangerous.’

‘Good thing you didn’t. You don’t seem very surprised. Did you know about this?’ Mr Akbar pointed at the hole.

‘Frankly, yes.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘To what purpose? You couldn’t have done anything about it. We prefer not to make a fuss over nothing.’

‘I’d hardly call this *nothing*.’

‘Let us put it like this, then. I didn’t want to drag you into this nasty business. That’s why we said nothing about it.’

‘Where *did* you sleep?’

‘Finding the double room along the corridor empty, we moved into it.’

‘A good thing for you, you did.’

‘May I ask you a question?’

‘Of course.’

‘Who discovered this sheet had been damaged?’

‘The boy who came to do the room; make the bed and tidy up.’

‘Which boy? The one who was on duty last night?’

‘No. The young fellow who served you earlier in the day.’

‘Obviously, up to the time he saw this cut in the sheet, he knew nothing about the attack on us. I mean, had he known what was going to happen he’d have kept his mouth shut about this. He wouldn’t have told you. That’s worth knowing, because it puts him in the clear.’

‘When did you discover this?’ Mr Akbar indicated the damaged bed linen.

‘We saw it happen.’

Mr Akbar stared. ‘You *saw* it...’

‘Well, we didn’t actually see the blow struck. We watched the man who did it creep along and get into the room through the window.’

‘Did you try to stop him?’

‘What good would that have done? We couldn’t have proved his motive before he went into the room. He was stripped and probably oiled. He couldn’t do us any harm, so not feeling inclined to give him a chance to stick a dagger in our ribs, we let him get on with it. From the way the man bolted I imagine he’d realized he’d knifed a dummy and suspected a trap.’

Mr Akbar shook his head. ‘What queer people you English are. I would have done something about it.’

‘Such as what?’

‘Well, I would have raised an alarm.’

‘Which would have told the people who sent the assassin that the plot had failed — that we had been prepared for something of the sort. Oh no. I think it’s better as it is. It’ll keep the enemy guessing.’

‘This is a serious matter,’ stated Akbar earnestly. ‘What can I do about it?’

‘As far as we’re concerned you need do nothing. If you take my advice you won’t mention it to anyone. I imagine someone knows about it. Hence the atmosphere you spoke of. The boy may have talked.’

‘But if nothing is done it will encourage them to try again.’

‘I’ve no doubt they’ll do that anyway, probably by trying a different method.’

Mr Akbar looked surprised. ‘You don’t seem to mind!’

‘We certainly do mind,’ Biggles assured him. ‘But at least we’ve been warned. I’m not going to pretend I’m shocked by what happened last night. We came here with our eyes wide open, prepared for opposition.’

‘You talk about *they*. Who do you mean by they?’

‘The gold smuggling gang. Who else? Lacey knew how it was being worked. That’s why they had to put him out of the way.’

‘Have you any idea who these men are?’

‘Not the remotest.’

‘One of them can’t be far away. He must be watching you.’

‘We had already come to that conclusion, Mr Akbar: but the only person we’ve seen, and spoken to, not on your staff, was a business gentleman who tells us his name is Holman Larta. He says he does a lot of travelling, so I

suppose you know him.'

'Yes indeed. A rich man and a charming one. He often passes through here. In the course of his business he covers the country from Bombay to Calcutta. No doubt my staff wish he came more often.'

'Why?'

Akbar smiled. 'He's generous with his tips.'

'I notice he walks with a limp. Does he suffer from some infirmity?'

'Yes. Some years ago he was involved in a car accident which resulted in him having to have a leg amputated.'

'So he now has a wooden one?'

'Well, an artificial one. He showed it to me one day. It's the latest thing in artificial limbs; not one of those clumsy old-fashioned pieces of wood; it's made of strip steel and canvas.'

'I've heard of them,' said Biggles casually.

'Will you be flying again tomorrow?'

'Of course. We shan't find Mr Lacey by sitting around.'

'Will you be taking Ram Singh with you?'

'If he wants to come, and you can spare him. He's no trouble to us, and for him it's all air experience if he still hopes to become a professional pilot.'

'That's all right with me.' Mr Akbar looked at his watch. 'I must be getting back to the office. I may see you later. Be careful.'

'If there's one thing you can be sure of, it's that, although we wouldn't claim to be infallible.'

'You're sure you don't want me to do anything about what happened last night?'

'I don't see what you could do.'

'I could make some inquiries.'

'If I know anything about India they wouldn't get you far. In fact, they might get you into trouble. No, Mr Akbar. Let it pass.'

'As you wish.' The manager walked away.

After he had gone, Biggles said quietly to Bertie: 'I'm glad we had that little chat because it definitely puts Akbar in the clear. Had he known what had been planned for last night, he wouldn't have brought us here to discuss it. He would have denied all knowledge of it. I believe the first he knew of it was when the boy told him about the torn sheet. That boy must also be okay, or he wouldn't have told Akbar, or anyone else. We'll get them all sorted out if we stay here long enough. Now, as we're on our feet we might as well walk along to the shed and have a word with Ram Singh.'

'Akbar didn't mind him flying with us.'

'That's another point in his favour. Had he known what was going on here, not wanting to see the boy come to any harm, he would have kept him on the ground.'

They found Ram Singh working on their Auster, polishing the fuselage. There was no one else in the hangar.

Biggles said: 'Stop work for the moment, Ram Singh, I want to have a word with you.'

'Yes, sir.' Ram Singh stopped what he was doing.

Biggles went on: 'Where do you live?'

'In Shara.'

'You mean in the town?'

'Yes.'

'That's a good two miles away. How do you get to and fro?'

'I have a bicycle.'

'And you go home every night?'

'Yes. I live with my mother. We have a little house. She bought it after my father died, to be near the place where I worked.' Ram Singh, naturally, was looking a little puzzled by these personal questions.

'Do you want to go on flying with us?' was the next one.

'I was hoping you'd allow me to do that, sir. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed this morning. I seldom have an opportunity to fly in a small plane.'

'All right. In that case I shall have to tell you something.' Biggles took a quick glance round and went on. 'You know why we are here; but do you realize you may be putting yourself in danger by flying with us?'

Ram Singh smiled. 'There's no danger in flying with you, sir.'

'You don't understand. There are some people who, for reasons of their own, do not want us to find Mr Lacey, or the plane he was flying when he disappeared. There is a possibility they may do some damage to the Auster, to cause a forced landing and perhaps a crash. You realize what that would mean if you were with us?'

'Yes. But I'd still like to fly with you.'

'You're prepared to take the risk?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good for you. In that case I'm going to ask you to do something to earn your place in the plane. It's as much in your own interest as ours.'

'I'll do anything you say.'

'You'd better hear what it is before you reach a decision. If you'd rather not do what I'm going to suggest you have only to say so. I shan't mind.'

'Just tell me what it is.'

'If anyone came here with the object of interfering with the plane it would be at night, not during the day with people about when he might be seen.'

'Of course.'

'In order to prevent anything of that sort the machine should be guarded through the night, every night: we can't do that because we shall have to reserve our energy for flying during the day. This doesn't mean the guard should stay awake all night. He could sleep in the plane. He wouldn't be seen by a person outside, but he would wake up if someone started to interfere —'

'You want me to sleep in the plane,' broke in Ram Singh, who had evidently grasped the situation instantly.

‘Will you do that?’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘You realize there might be some danger in this?’

‘I can take care of myself.’

‘I sincerely hope you’re right. It means you’ll have to tell your mother you won’t be coming home for the next few nights. You can say you’ve volunteered for night duty, which would be true. It also means you’ll have to make arrangements for your meals. You could leave here early and return at sundown.’

‘Mother won’t mind; but I shall have to ask Mr Akbar for his permission to leave early.’

‘You can leave me to arrange that. Can you start tonight?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. One other thing. When you go home could you find a whistle?’

‘A *whistle*!’

‘Yes. A loud one. One which, if you blew it here, we could hear at the rest-house. It isn’t far away and we shall be on the alert. That’s a precaution in case you’re attacked. Blow the whistle and we’ll come running.’

‘Very well, if you think that’s necessary. I can buy a whistle in the town.’

‘Good. We don’t want you to get hurt. I shall pay you a bonus because you’ll be working for us. Can I take it you’ll come back here tonight as soon as it gets dark?’

‘I shall be here, you can rely on it,’ said Ram Singh firmly.

‘Then we’ll leave it at that. We shall be along at dawn, or soon after, for another day’s flying.’

Said Biggles to Bertie, as they left the hangar and walked back to the rest-house: ‘That’s fixed that. I can’t say I’m entirely happy about it. That boy may not realize the sort of people we’re up against, and if he got hurt I’d never forgive myself.’

‘Nor would his mother forgive us,’ murmured Bertie.

CHAPTER 8

THE WHISTLE

The night was hot. The air was heavy, oppressive; without a breath of breeze it felt stagnant, stifling. Bertie, who had already changed sweat-damp pyjamas for dry ones in the hope of sleeping more comfortably, was relieved to see grey dawn creeping through the bedroom window. Moving quietly so as not to awaken Biggles — they were using the same double room as a safety precaution — he rinsed his mouth with water. The water was tepid and offered little refreshment, so with the glass in his hand he went to the window and looked out, through a dim twilight, for the moon had set, across the dusty parking square.

Silent though he had been, he must have awakened Biggles, unless he was already awake, for his voice came from the darkness of his bed. 'I must admit this vitiated atmosphere is a bit hard to take,' he said wearily. 'If it wasn't a rare occurrence I'd say the monsoon is going to arrive a bit before its time. It can happen. It usually builds up this sort of sticky heat. If Akbar has any sort of met. service he should get a warning. Remind me to ask him about it. We don't want to be caught unprepared.'

'Never mind the weather, old boy,' answered Bertie in a peculiar voice. 'Come here. The light isn't too good, but if that isn't Larta's car standing out there...'

Biggles got off his bed, crossed quickly to the window and looked out. 'You're right. When did he come back, I wonder? He must be sleeping here.'

Any further discussion was cut by a sound which, while it would not have been unexpected earlier in the night, at this late hour, with dawn on the horizon, did surprise them. It was the shrill blast of a whistle, twice repeated.

Biggles did not stop to question it. He delayed only long enough to pull on the light canvas shoes he had been wearing. Without stopping to lace them, he dropped out of the window and raced for the hangar with Bertie on his heels.

As they reached the end of the bungalow they caught a brief glimpse of a man on the far side, running in the opposite direction. As he disappeared from sight Bertie hesitated as if to give chase; but Biggles, without pause, snapped: 'Never mind him. Let's get to the shed.'

They ran on.

To their great relief they saw Ram Singh, apparently unharmed, standing at the wide open doors of the hangar.

'Are you all right?' asked Biggles tersely.

'Yes. I'm all right.'

'You blew the whistle.'

'Yes. I blew at once when I saw the man go to the Auster.'

'He didn't attack you?'

‘He didn’t see me.’

‘How was that? What exactly happened?’

‘I will tell you. I slept in the plane as you ordered. When I saw it was beginning to get light, feeling a little stiff I got up to stretch my legs. I had been a little cramped in my seat.’

‘Yes — yes. Go on.’

‘I walked to the doors to look out and saw a man coming this way, as if he was coming here. He was carrying a little bag, a sack, which I thought might contain tools. I stepped back behind this old fuselage and watched. When he got to the doors he stopped and looked behind him. Then he came in, passing quite close to me, and hurried straight to your Auster. Now I was sure he was up to mischief, so I blew the whistle before he had a chance to do any damage.’

‘Quite right. What did he do?’

‘He ran.’

‘You’re sure he didn’t touch the machine?’

‘Quite sure. He wouldn’t have had time. He dashed out, passing close to me again, and ran away towards the rest-house. I thought it better not to try to stop him.’

‘Very wise. That would have been asking for trouble. Did you recognize him?’

‘No. It was too dark. It was getting light outside, but it was still black inside the hangar; and after the man had gone out I could only see his back.’

‘You say he didn’t see you, so he can’t know who blew the whistle. That’s a good thing, otherwise you might find yourself in danger.’

‘He may have thought there were two or three people here and suspected a trap. If so, that could be why he ran so fast. Oh yes. There’s one other thing I must tell you. When I blew the whistle and he started to run, I heard a sound as if he had dropped something.’

‘Have you found it?’

‘I haven’t looked. I was still at the doors watching to see if you had heard the whistle. You came quickly.’

‘As fast as our legs would bring us. Let’s see if we can find out what the rascal dropped.’

‘It didn’t sound like a bag of tools, although now I come to think of it I didn’t notice him carrying the bag when he ran out. It was more like a small hard object; it rattled on the floor.’

‘Let’s have a look. Whatever it was it shouldn’t be hard to find.’

Biggles was right. With a little daylight now coming in through the open doors, they had no difficulty in seeing at once that the man had in fact dropped his bag. At all events, a bag was there, a small sack, as Ram Singh had said. It was made of some sort of coarse canvas and lay near the door of the aircraft. The mouth had been tied with a piece of cord, now loose, as if the man had been on the point of opening it when he was disturbed.

Ram Singh stepped towards it as if to pick it up.

‘Just a minute,’ said Biggles. ‘Was it my imagination, or did I see the bag move?’

They all stood still, looking at it.

‘It is moving,’ said Bertie. ‘There it is again.’

‘Stand still, both of you.’ Biggles went to the side of the hangar where a heap of scrap had been thrown and returned with a length of tube that might have been a strut. Raising it high, he brought it down smartly across the bag.

There was no longer any doubt about it moving. It squirmed across the floor. Biggles struck again and again until it moved no more. Then, gingerly, he picked it up by a bottom corner and tipped out the contents. It was, as must already have been suspected, a snake. Quite small, it looked harmless enough, but Biggles knew better.

So evidently did Ram Singh, for he said in a low shocked voice: ‘A *krait*.’

Biggles lit a cigarette.

‘What was he going to do with it?’ said Ram Singh.

Biggles answered. ‘I imagine his intention, had he not been disturbed, was to put it in the plane, so that when we took off we should have had an extra passenger — one we could have well done without. It’s unlikely we should have known anything about it until it struck one of us.’

‘A charming thought, I must say,’ murmured Bertie.

Said Biggles to Ram Singh, with a wry smile: ‘You see what I mean about flying with us not being safe? It’s no joy ride. Do you still want to fly with us?’

‘Of course, sahib.’ In his emotion Ram Singh used a term that was becoming obsolete. ‘Who could have done it?’

‘Ah! That’s the big question.’

‘Have you no idea?’

‘I wouldn’t try to guess.’

At this juncture Bertie took a pace back and stepped on something, close to the machine, that had not been noticed while interest was focused on the bag. The object broke with a crunch. Moving his foot, Bertie looked down to see what it was. Stooping, he picked up a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles with the lenses broken. Holding them by one of the side pieces, he held them out for Biggles to see. ‘I have a feeling I’ve seen those before, or a pair very much like them,’ he said softly.

‘So have I,’ answered Biggles, taking them. He showed them to Ram Singh. ‘Do you know anyone who wears glasses like these? They must have been the small hard object you heard fall.’

Ram Singh was silent. He stared. But his expression betrayed him.

‘You know, don’t you,’ prompted Biggles.

‘Yes.’ Ram Singh’s voice was hardly audible.

‘Who?’

‘Mr Bula Din.’

‘Yes.’

‘The man I saw didn’t look like him.’

‘What did he look like?’

‘A beggar.’

‘He may have dressed like that for what he was going to do.’

‘Yes. Of course. If he had been in his ordinary clothes I’m sure I would have recognized him.’

‘Naturally, he wouldn’t want to be recognized should anyone see him.’

‘Would Bula Din know why you are here, sir?’

‘As he works in Mr Akbar’s office, I imagine he would be certain to know.’ Biggles went on. ‘Now listen carefully. You won’t mention this to anyone. Not even Mr Akbar. You understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘If you say a word it may cost us all our lives.’

‘I shall not speak. I shall know nothing.’

‘Good. We understand each other. But time’s getting on. This will make us late. You still want to fly with us — you’re sure? If after what’s happened you’d rather not, you have only to say so. You have a good reason.’

‘I will fly, please.’

‘You can’t fly on an empty stomach. How long would it take you to go home, have some breakfast and comeback?’

‘Half an hour.’

‘Don’t break your neck. A minute or two is neither here nor there. We shall have to go to the rest-house to dress and have something to eat. Off you go. Be as quick as you can. If we’re not here when you get back, wait. Meanwhile we’ll look over the plane — just in case anything has been touched. You filled the tanks, as I ordered?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. We’ll check that, too. Now you get along. Keep clear of the rest-house. It would be better if no one knew you’d been here.’

In a minute Ram Singh was pedalling his cycle towards the town.

Bertie looked at Biggles with serious eyes. ‘What about it, old boy?’

‘You mean, what about Bula Din?’

‘Yes.’

‘I shall do nothing.’

‘You mean, you won’t let him know we found his glasses here?’

‘That needs thinking about. I see no reason why we should. We can play fox as well as him.’

‘But he’s bound to realize where he lost them, if he didn’t know it at the time. He was in too much of a hurry to get away to stop to look for them. It’s reasonable to suppose he’ll come back here expecting to find them.’

‘True enough. Very well, let him find them. We’ll throw them down where he dropped them. That should set his mind at rest. He’ll suppose nobody noticed them.’

‘But what about the bally snake. He’s not likely to forget he left that here, too.’

‘That’s not likely to worry him as much as his glasses. They could identify him. That infernal *krait* wouldn’t, or the bag it was in.’

‘He’ll wonder what became of them.’

‘That gives me an idea. We’ll get rid of the snake and leave the bag where it is. There’s nothing to show what was in it. The string was untied. With the top open he’ll think the snake escaped. He may even hope it got into our aircraft. Anyway, it’ll give him something to occupy his mind.’ As he finished speaking Biggles picked up the reptile by the tail and threw it behind the pile of scrap. ‘It’s dead, so it can’t hurt anybody,’ he observed. ‘Now let’s see about some breakfast and a bath. We’ve lost a lot of time, but that couldn’t be prevented. There’s one more thing we’d better do before we go and that’s put the machine outside where it can be seen from the rest-house, just in case our snake-charming friend has any more bright ideas before we’re ready to go—’

Biggles threw down the broken spectacles near the bag and together they wheeled the Auster outside, leaving it on the apron in front of the hangar. This done, they returned to the rest-house, at Biggles’ suggestion, via the car park.

‘Notice anything?’ he queried.

‘Larta’s car. It’s gone.’

‘That needn’t surprise us. If my guess is right he came back here to get things organized, but, as before, left it to someone else to do the dirty work. They’re too anxious to be rid of us, with the result they’re giving their game away. With enough rope they may hang themselves.’

‘That would be fine and dandy as long as they don’t hang us first, old boy — if you get what I mean.’

‘I get it; and I can only repeat what I’ve said before. We shall have to keep our eyes wide open all the time.’

Going in they nearly collided with Bula Din going out. He was dressed in his usual clothes but, significantly, was without glasses. He wished them a polite ‘good morning’.

‘Good morning to you,’ returned Biggles cheerfully. ‘You’re starting work early, aren’t you?’

‘It’s my day for inspection,’ explained the secretary, without stopping.

‘You’ll notice he had an excuse ready for being up so early,’ said Biggles softly. ‘If he’s the snake man he wasn’t long changing his clothes. Let’s watch where he goes. We can see from the lounge. I’d rather see a tiger prowling round our machine than that rat. It’s getting easier all the time to see why poor old Algy, working here alone, came a cropper.’

Bula Din went straight to the hangar they had just vacated. Within five minutes he came out again and walked on. He did not go near the Auster.

‘So now he knows where he lost his glasses,’ said Biggles quietly.

‘I’d like to know what he’s thinking,’ replied Bertie.

‘That wouldn’t be hard to guess,’ returned Biggles.

‘I’d say he’s wondering where his snake went, hoping, no doubt, that it might still get its foul fangs into one of us. But let’s get a move on.’

‘Pity you killed it, old boy. It might have got its teeth into him.’

‘Oh no. He’d take damn good care that didn’t happen,’ was Biggles’s last word.

CHAPTER 9

A DISCOVERY AND A MYSTERY

A brisk shower-bath and an equally quick light breakfast, and Biggles and Bertie, wearing their sun-hats, were again on their way to the hangar. As they drew near they looked for Ram Singh, but not seeing him assumed — correctly as it turned out — that he was not yet back.

Going into the hangar Biggles nudged Bertie. No words were necessary to explain his meaning. The broken spectacles together with the snake bag were no longer there.

‘He wasn’t long removing the evidence of his dirty work,’ he observed. ‘There’s no one else here, so it could only have been Bula Din. That, I think, is conclusive proof of his guilt. Had he known nothing about the affair here he needn’t have touched the things. It isn’t his job to clean up the floor. He must be doing some hard thinking.’

‘Seeing us coming down from the sheds in our pyjamas, he must know we were here,’ Bertie pointed out.

‘The Auster standing outside would tell him that, anyway. As we didn’t say anything about what happened here, he’s probably hoping we didn’t notice the things he dropped in his hurry to get away. No doubt he’s wondering who blew the whistle.’

This, in a way, was presently confirmed, for leaving the hangar they saw the man about whom they were talking coming towards them.

His first words were: ‘Where’s Ram Singh?’

Biggles affected surprise. ‘How should I know? Isn’t he here?’

‘I can’t find him.’

‘Then he can’t have arrived yet. He must still be at home.’

The Indian looked puzzled. ‘Isn’t he flying with you today?’

‘Yes, if he wants to, and if he arrives in time. Ah! I see him coming now.’

Bula Din was looking more mystified.

Ram Singh, pedalling furiously, came up and jumped off his bicycle.

‘Sorry I’m late, sir, but I had a puncture,’ he explained.

‘Never mind; we’ve only just got here ourselves,’ returned Biggles.

Bula Din turned to go. ‘Well, I trust you have a good day. Be careful.’

‘We always do our best to be that,’ Biggles assured him. ‘Were you thinking of anything in particular?’ he inquired blandly.

‘No. No — no. It was just a remark.’ Bula Din smiled and walked away.

When he was at a safe distance Biggles said: ‘This has got him really foxed. He was sure it could only have been one of us, or Ram Singh, who blew that whistle. He saw Ram Singh arrive, so he would suppose he had been at home all night. We behave as if nothing had happened. Now he doesn’t know what to make of it.’

‘Jolly good. Let the stinker do some guessing.’

Biggles thought it advisable to tell Ram Singh what had transpired in his absence, concerning Bula Din, in order that he might fully comprehend the situation. He would rather have said nothing about it, but in view of the danger he decided it would not be fair to leave him in ignorance. ‘You see now how wise it was to keep silent,’ he concluded.

Ram Singh nodded, his eyes sombre with concern. ‘Bula Din does not want you to find Mr Lacey,’ he said gravely.

‘That is what we now have reason to think.’

‘Why?’

‘The answer is a long story which I will tell you when we have more time. If we are right, Bula Din is in the pay of some bad men, men who are doing a great disservice to India. Perhaps Mr Lacey knew that, so it was resolved to get rid of him.’

‘Killed?’

‘Perhaps. We don’t know. That is what we are hoping to find out.’

‘I will help you as much as I can,’ said Ram Singh, simply. ‘Mr Lacey was a nice man, always kind to me.’

‘Good. Remember, if Bula Din speaks to you, as he may, you know nothing about the snake or his glasses. At the moment he doesn’t understand what happened. No doubt he would like to know. He tried to kill us, so let us leave him to work it out for himself. Now we’ll get into the air to see if we can find out what became of Mr Lacey. I shall fly a little to the west of the ground we looked at yesterday and perhaps search a little more of the Terai. Keep your eyes open and let me know if you see anything of interest.’

‘I will do that, sir.’

They took their places in the aircraft. The engine running, Biggles took more time than usual testing the controls, ailerons, elevators and rudder. Satisfied, he took off and headed north.

The flight that followed was a repetition of the previous day on a slightly different course, a little more to the west. It happened that here there was less jungle, more cultivated ground where an aircraft could not escape observation. Naturally, this took less time to cover, with the result that in a little over an hour they were on the fringe of the Terai. Farther on to the north towered the Himalayan giants.

Biggles now throttled back to a speed as low as he dare risk in such a treacherous, overheated atmosphere and, dropping down to little more than a hundred feet, began a systematic search, flying methodically to and fro, up and down, sometimes circling over forest or areas of extra thick jungle, tall rushes, bamboo and *lantana*. It was monotonous work, but he stuck to his task, knowing that it would have to be done thoroughly if it was not to be a waste of time. It was no use relying on luck.

This went on for more than an hour without sight of anything of the slightest interest. There was little sign of life; a few birds, mostly vultures, and

once a sambur drinking at a pool. It faded into a thicket at their approach.

‘One would have thought there would be more game about considering the absence of blokes with guns,’ remarked Bertie. ‘The bally place looks utterly deserted.’

‘It may look that way, but you can take it from me it’s far from being dead,’ answered Biggles. ‘This is the wrong time of day to see wild life. Everything has had a meal, and a drink, and has now retired into the shade for the heat of the day. A tiger, like a cat — which it is — will usually lie up for a snooze near the place where he had his breakfast.’

Hardly had the words left his lips when Ram Singh touched him on the shoulder. He was pointing. Not at the ground, as might have been expected, but high up in the sky, straight ahead.

It took Biggles a moment or two to pick up the object to which he was calling attention. Then he spotted it. Far away in the distance, moving swiftly southward from the north-west, a tiny black speck showed against a background of unbroken blue. It might have been a fly on the windscreen, or a migrating stork; but Biggles, with the eye of experience, knew better. It was an aircraft.

‘Can you see it?’ he asked Bertie.

‘Yes. I’ve got it. What the devil can it be doing here?’

‘Ask me something easier.’

‘Do you recognize the type?’

‘No,’ answered Biggles, squinting through the open fingers of his left hand. ‘It’s too far away. Whatever it is, with its speed and height we’d never be able to get near it.’

‘I suppose it could be a passenger job, out of Nepal?’

‘Possibly, but I doubt it. It looks too small to me for anything of that sort. Keep an eye on it.’ Half over his shoulder Biggles went on: ‘Ram Singh. Do you know of a regular service that comes this way, making perhaps for Shara aerodrome?’

‘No.’

‘You’d know of such a service if there was one?’

‘Yes.’

They watched the machine until it faded slowly in the heat haze.

Bertie said: ‘Well, what do you make of that?’

‘What are we to make of it? Your guess is as good as mine. We don’t own the sky; but I must admit I didn’t expect to see another aircraft near here. That’s why it didn’t occur to me to look up. Congratulations, Ram Singh, on your eyesight.’

Bertie went on: ‘I suppose it couldn’t have been Algy’s Hunter?’

Biggles had turned west to watch the stranger out of sight. ‘Not a chance. For what possible reason would he be flying at such an altitude?’

Nothing more was said.

Biggles was still pondering the possibilities when again he was jogged, this

time by Bertie, who said: 'Look half left. Can you see what I see?'

Biggles, who had been scrutinizing the ground on the right hand side, banked a little to bring into view what Bertie had seen. He stared, muttering: 'I don't believe it.'

'What about that, eh?' queried Bertie.

Biggles did not answer. He altered course a trifle and slipped off some altitude.

Bertie went on: 'If that isn't a jungle airstrip I never saw one. A bit rough, perhaps, but no obstructions worth worrying about and enough clearance for an aircraft to get on the carpet. I swear that couldn't happen by accident.'

Biggles agreed, and put the Auster in a tight circle over a long clearing, roughly oval, that occupied a slight eminence in the manner of a low plateau set in the middle of a mixture of jungle and forest as dense as they had seen. Round the greater part of the perimeter ran a fringe of scrub, some of it fairly tall: flowering trees, dwarf palms, bamboo, elephant grass and the like. Of what the remaining part of the boundary consisted was not easy to make out. It appeared to be a rolling sea of green too thick for the eye to penetrate to discover what lay underneath.

The actual plateau — to call it that for want of a better word — looked arid, and supported only a sprinkling of coarse herbage. There were wide sandy patches, mostly in a line that ran curiously straight the full length of the oval. It seemed most improbable that this could be natural. Nature rarely works in straight lines.

'We've seen as much as we shall see from up here,' said Biggles, bringing the plane back to even keel.

'Does that mean you're thinking of going down?'

'I don't know,' answered Biggles slowly. 'I don't like it. It's risky. The last thing I want is to be stuck here with a busted undercart. I can see no sign of wheel tracks, or anything else to suggest a machine ever landed here. Had Algy tried to get down and made a mess of it, the Hunter, or pieces of it, would still be here. I can't imagine anyone trying to salvage a crash out of this sort of jungle.'

'You think we'd better leave it?'

'I'm trying to make up my mind. I must confess I'm curious. If this was man-made it must have had a purpose, and the only wheeled vehicle that I can imagine getting here is an aircraft. With swamps all round, and some open pools, I doubt if even a jeep, a tractor or a bulldozer, could get here. Another thing. Look how nicely it's tucked away. It was a slice of luck you spotted the place. We might have passed close to it a score of times without noticing it. I certainly wasn't looking for anything of the sort.'

'As you say, old boy, it's nicely tucked away. Right away from anywhere and anybody. I'd wager no one comes here once in many blue moons.'

'I'll tell you what,' replied Biggles, as if he had reached a decision. 'Before we do anything else we'll fly along the strip at no altitude and have a really

close look at it. Can you hear what I'm saying, Ram Singh?

'I hear.'

'All right. When I go down, look hard for anything that doesn't strike you as natural. Look particularly for wheel marks.'

'Yes, sahib.'

Biggles turned, took a long run and came back skimming the ground at little more than stalling speed.

'See anything?' he asked Bertie when, at the far end of the run, he pulled up in a gentle climbing turn.

'Not a thing.'

'How about you, Ram Singh?'

'I see nothing.'

'Very well. Now we'll try it the other way.'

The manoeuvre was repeated in the reverse direction, but the result was the same.

'Dash it all,' muttered Biggles irritably, 'what can this be but a landing ground? I don't understand it.'

'Could it be one of ours, an emergency job dating back to the time the RAF was in India?'

'No. It would have become overgrown by now. In the tropics nature doesn't take long to cover a bare patch with something. Let's have another try.'

This time Biggles flew along the fringe of the strip, instead of the middle, first in one direction and back the opposite side.

'Not a bally sausage,' snorted Bertie.

'I'm not so sure about that,' argued Biggles. 'I wouldn't swear to it, but I saw something that might have been a track forking off to the south.'

'A game path. There must be plenty.'

'Probably. Perhaps not. I can't believe no one ever comes here. Why make something unless it's to be used? It must have been quite a business to clear this piece of ground, and a long walk to get to the job. Who would work in a place like this, Ram Singh?'

'Poor coolies, perhaps from India or the mountains. They will do anything to earn money to live.'

'Well, I never did like mysteries, and this one will keep me awake at night until I've solved it,' declared Biggles. "There's only one way we might possibly settle this and that's by going down. All we shall do up here is waste petrol.' He was still circling low. 'Fasten your safety belts and hold your breath.'

The Auster cruised along to beyond the end of the cleared strip and, taking plenty of room, came back, airscrew idling, slowly sinking.

In the ordinary way such a landing, in still air, on what was known to be an emergency landing ground, would have been a simple operation for a pilot of any experience. But this was a different matter. Was there or was there not an

unknown hazard? This could only be ascertained by putting the matter to test in actual practice. And, of course, the locality had to be taken into account. The slightest mishap involving damage to the aircraft could have disastrous if not fatal results. Wherefore Biggles did not make the effort without a qualm.

He need not have worried. In the event nothing happened. Nothing at all. The Auster settled down like a gull on still water. It bumped a little as it ran on to a standstill over minor irregularities in the ground; but that was to be expected. It could happen anywhere.

When the machine had stopped Biggles sat back, smiling with what may have been relief. 'So there we are,' he said. 'Nothing to it.'

'We know that now, but we didn't know it five minutes ago,' Bertie pointed out.

Biggles went on. 'I'm more than ever convinced that this, whether it is used or not, was intended to be a landing place, emergency or otherwise. I wonder, did Algy know about it?'

'I doubt it.'

'Why do you doubt it?'

'Well, I can't see him trying to put a Hunter down on it. A light machine like an Auster is one thing; a fast military type would be a horse of a very different colour.'

'He might have known of it without ever intending to put the Hunter down on it. But let's not argue about that. I'll move to where I thought I saw a track; then we'll have a look round with our feet on the ground. We might as well take the chance to stretch our legs. I could do with a cigarette anyway. Unless I'm fooling myself, it helps me to think.'

He manoeuvred the aircraft to the desired position and switched off.

They all got out and stood looking about them. The heat was formidable. Absolute silence reigned. The click of Biggles's petrol lighter as he lit a cigarette sounded exceptionally loud. He walked a little way and stopped, looking at the ground. The others joined him.

'This is what I saw from the air,' he said, pointing.

¹ Sambur. A species of large deer, with a mane and fine antlers, found in India.

CHAPTER 10

DETECTIVE WORK IN THE WILDS

They were looking at — well, it could hardly be called a path. It was a slight depression, the merest suggestion of a demarcation in the sandy soil. Starting at the side of the supposed landing ground, it ran off at an angle in a southerly direction, slightly descending, always in a straight line. It disappeared at the nearest point of the jungle that occupied the lower ground on that side. It could not even be called a track, so indistinct was it. Because it was only just possible to discern anything at all was probably the reason why Bertie remarked he was surprised that Biggles was able to spot it from the air.

‘As a matter of fact,’ answered Biggles, ‘I could see it more easily from above than from where we are standing now, right beside it. But there’s nothing unusual in that. I’ve often known it happen, as no doubt you have.’

‘What do you make of it? I can’t see a mark of any sort to give us a clue as to who or what made it.’

‘All I know is, somebody or something has been coming or going this way. Why does it run in a straight line? That’s unnatural. It couldn’t happen by accident.’

‘If it was a game track it should show hoof or paw marks, perhaps droppings,’ said Bertie, walking a few paces with his eyes scanning the ground.

Biggles turned to Ram Singh. ‘What do you make of it?’

‘Men or animals come this way several times.’

‘That’s what I would have thought. Yet why are there no footprints? I don’t understand it.’

‘It’s got me beat,’ admitted Bertie.

Ram Singh put a hand to his head as if a thought had struck him. He went off a little way to the nearest tussock of grass, short wiry stuff, and came back with a tuft in his hand. Dropping on his knees, he started a gentle movement, using the grass as a fan. Without actually touching the ground this disturbed a top layer of dust, fanning it aside. Very slowly a mark appeared, blurred and indistinct at first, but as he persevered it gradually took shape. It was a print of the shape of a human foot. Not a bare foot; the sole of a shoe, or sandal, or a similar protection.

‘Jolly good, laddie,’ congratulated Bertie.

Biggles said, ‘You know, Ram Singh, I’m beginning to wonder what we would have done without you.’

Ram Singh smiled with pleasure at this praise as he went on fanning, the print becoming more distinct. ‘I think a coolie comes here,’ he observed. Continuing to fan, he exposed another similar mark. ‘Two coolies, perhaps more,’ he corrected himself. ‘These marks were not made by the same foot.’

The men have not been here lately. Dust has had time to settle and hide foot-marks. I think no one has been here since the last time there was a wind.'

'There has been no wind since I arrived at Shara,' Biggles pointed out.

'What else but wind could raise much dust?'

'I can think of something that would raise plenty of dust.'

Ram Singh's eyes asked a question.

Biggles answered it. 'A plane landing or taking off would blow up the sand and dust. A plane would make dust here even standing still if the engine was left running.'

Again Bertie said: 'Jolly good. I don't know how you think of these things. I must be a clot.'

'That didn't take much working out. The dust we made landing hasn't all settled yet.' To Ram Singh he went on: 'Try fanning the landing track. You may be able to uncover wheel marks.'

This was a longer operation, but after several failures, Ram Singh, using his tuft of grass, revealed a groove that could only have been made by a wheel. He exposed it for about a yard.

'That's enough,' said Biggles. 'That could only have been made by the wheel of an aircraft, for the simple reason no other vehicle could get here. Let's try an experiment.' He went to the tyre mark, put a heel against it and took two good paces at right angles from it. 'Now brush here,' he told Ram Singh.

Complying with the order, the young Indian soon exposed another, identical mark.

Said Bertie, flippantly: 'Go on at this rate, old boy, and presently we'll unearth a complete flying machine.'

'We're getting on,' agreed Biggles, grinning.

Ram Singh was looking astonished. 'How did you know where to look for the other wheel mark?' he questioned.

'Magic. That's what it is. Magic,' declared Bertie.

'Elementary, my dear Bertie, as the wizard Sherlock Holmes might have said. Now I'll tell you something. Algy has been here. The Auster Autocrat is fitted with Dunlop tyres, as you should know, having seen them often enough. That first tyre mark looked to me mighty like a Dunlop. The wheel track of the Auster, as you should also know if you've done your homework, is six feet. The two paces I took were six feet as near as I could judge. Lo and behold, there's the twin track. There can't be many Austers in this part of the world, so it's safe to conclude Algy knew about this place. He landed here. That's worth knowing. When and why he landed here we have still to find out; but we're making progress.'

'Are you going to do any more dust blowing?'

'No. Not without something definite to look for. Relying on guesswork we could be here for a week without finding anything. Still, as we're down we might as well have a look round. Algy wouldn't be likely to try to put a

Hunter down here, so I don't expect to find one. At the moment I'm more interested in this track — now we know for certain it *is* a track. It must lead to somewhere. The footprints we've uncovered lead away from here. Where were the people going who made them? That's what I'd like to know.'

'They must go to India. There is nowhere else in that direction,' volunteered Ram Singh.

'Here, where we stand, I reckon we must be at least five or six miles from open country, so if that's where the track ends, we might as well forget it. Until I'm forced to, I'm not walking that distance in this heat, through this sort of country, with no better protection than a pistol. If the track kept to open ground all the way it would be a different matter. We might then be able to trace it from the air. But it doesn't. As you see, it makes a bee-line for the jungle, so there, as far as air observation is concerned, it will disappear. I'll walk along and check that. It isn't far. I don't think the machine can come to any harm, but I don't believe in taking chances, so you'd better stay with it, Bertie. We shan't be out of your sight. I see some monkeys in the trees coming to have a look at us. Keep an eye on them. Don't let them go near the machine. They can be mischievous little devils.'

'Okay, old boy.'

Biggles, taking Ram Singh with him, walked off, following the track. This presented no difficulty, but when it reached the jungle it was soon lost in bush undergrowth. As Biggles had predicted it would have been hopeless to try to follow it from the air. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, on the ground, so he wasted no more time on it.

They returned to the aircraft where Bertie was squatting under a wing, the only shade available.

'Nothing doing,' Biggles told him.

'How about having a drink of nice cold tea from the Thermos?'

'No thanks. That's for emergency only, and we haven't reached that stage yet.'

'Fair enough. So now what do we do?'

'We'll have a quick look round while we're here and then make for home. We've been out long enough for one day, in this blistering heat. We'll just walk round the perimeter of the place. I don't suppose we shall find anything, but one never knows. Something may have been dropped by the people who made this place, or those who have been using it since. Nobody went to all this trouble just for the fun of it. Apart from that, I'd like to have a look at the sort of country that surrounds it. From the air one can see plenty of jungle, but not what lies underneath. But first things first, and that's to put the machine in position for a quick getaway should we have to move off in a hurry. I can't see that happening here, but one never knows. Funny how things stick in your mind. When I was a small boy I heard an Admiral of the Fleet say he never left his ship without having it ready to move off at a moment's notice. That made sense to me.'

As there was no wind, all Biggles had to do was put the Auster in line with the clear strip with plenty of runway in front of it. This done the party set off on foot to the nearest point of the jungle and from there followed the fringe, keeping, of course, on the open ground.

It was some time before they found anything of the slightest interest, and even Biggles had to admit he was afraid they were wasting their time. When they did stop to look at something, it appeared to have no importance as far as their immediate purpose was concerned.

They had walked rather more than half-way round the open area when on their left it was discovered that the ground fell away sharply into a narrow valley. It was not deep enough to be called a ravine, or large enough for a *nullah*. As they paused to look at it, from far below came the gentle murmur of running water. They couldn't see it. The jungle was too thick. It was evident that a brook or a stream ran through the bottom of the valley. In fact, as Biggles remarked, the water course may have created the valley by cutting a bed for itself in the sandy ground.

The reason why the valley, as such, had not been observed from the air was plain to see. It was full of trees of one sort or another. Those near the top were not very tall, but as the ground fell away those lower down, in order to reach the light, had grown much higher. The effect of this was to bring the tops level, so that from above there was no indication of what was under them. The trees growing up from the bottom might have been a hundred feet high.

They wasted no time looking at what, after all, was a common natural feature, but walked on to complete their circuit, noticing that presently the valley wandered away to be lost in a tangled mass of timber and jungle. Even so, its course could be traced by the rich green of the foliage.

It was at the point where the valley left the landing ground that Biggles came to an abrupt halt, exclaiming: 'Hello! What have we here?'

The others joined him and gazed at what had produced the question. There was a patch of flat sand. They had passed several. But this one was different. It looked as if it had been scratched with a giant rake. That is to say, across it, at right angles to their line of march, ran a number of short, shallow, but clearly defined grooves, as might have been made by a man using a walking stick. There were five of these, parallel but irregularly spaced.

Biggles said to Ram Singh: 'Do you know of any living creature that leaves such a track?'

Ram Singh shook his head. 'No. I have never seen a track like this.'

Bertie spoke, adjusting his monocle. 'You know, old boy, this reminds me of something.'

'And me. What does it remind you of?'

'Bullets.'

Biggles nodded. 'That's it. I don't see how those marks could have been made by anything else. They couldn't have been made by pellets from a shotgun. These were rifle shots. I'd say it would need an automatic rifle or a

machine-gun to make a pattern like that. There's been shooting here.'

'I'm beginning to understand why Algy didn't get back from his last trip,' said Bertie lugubriously. 'We know he landed here — unless there are more Austers about here than we know of.'

Biggles went on: 'The bullets didn't go into the sand, so they must have had a low trajectory. They hit the sand and ricocheted, so they could only have been fired at a flat, or nearly flat, angle. At what, I wonder? They can't have hit what they were fired at if it had blood in its veins, or there would be stains. Where did the bullets go?'

Raising his eyes to the tree tops that showed above the rim of the valley, he continued, answering his own question: 'Unless they were deflected by stones or pebbles, and I don't see any, the shots must have gone straight on into the trees. Let's have a look.'

A few paces took them to the trees, or as near to them as they could get without going over the lip of the valley.

'There we are,' said Biggles, pointing to a strip of bark that hung like a ribbon from a branch. The gash from which it had been torn showed white, showing that the wound was recent.

'The bullet didn't go into the branch,' resumed Biggles. 'It struck it on the side, a glancing blow, and was deflected to...' His eyes probed the foliage. 'Yes! The next branch to it. The thick one. You can see the white splash. I'd wager there's a bullet under that mark, unless it went right through, which I doubt, having first hit the ground, then the lower branch. That would be enough to take the sting out of it.' Turning to Ram Singh: 'Do you think you could get up to it?'

'I'll try.'

'Good boy. Have you got a knife?'

'No.'

'Here. Take mine.' Biggles handed over his penknife. 'Careful how you go.'

Ram Singh made no difficulty of getting into the tree. Jumping, he caught a lower branch and pulled himself up. He went on to the mark, still only a few yards from where the others stood watching. After working for a minute or two with the knife he said: 'It's here. I can feel it with the point of the knife; but it has gone in deep and will take some time to dig out. The wood is hard.'

'Never mind,' answered Biggles. 'I only wanted to know if it was there. It isn't important. Come down.'

While Ram Singh was making the return journey, Bertie said: 'What do you make of it? I have an uneasy feeling this hasn't improved our chances of finding poor old Algy.'

'We don't know the shots were fired at him.'

'Who else would be here to be shot at?'

Biggles shrugged. 'I wouldn't know.'

'It must have been Algy. We know he landed here. The wheel track of the

Auster is proof of that. To me what happened here is as plain as a pikestaff. He landed in a trap. Anyhow, the people who run this place didn't want him here, so they turned a gun on him. That's the answer, old boy. Let's face it.'

'You think they hit him?'

'Of course.'

Biggles lit a cigarette. 'In that case, where's his machine?'

'He may have left it and been on foot.'

Biggles shook his head. 'You put forward a good argument, but I'm not convinced you've got it right. Shall I tell you what I think?'

'I'm listening.'

'We saw a bullet hole in Algy's Auster — remember?'

'I'd forgotten that.'

'We now know where in all probability he collected it. It was here. On that occasion he got away and went home. Then what did he do? You know Algy. He'd be hopping mad. He went to Calcutta and borrowed a Hunter with the intention of coming back here and doing a spot of shooting himself. The Auster didn't carry a gun. With a Hunter he'd be able to give as good as he got. He came back here in the Hunter —'

'It comes to the same thing,' broke in Bertie. 'Something went wrong and all he did was get himself shot. That's pretty obvious now. Otherwise he'd have gone back to Shara.'

'I still say, in that case, where's the Hunter?'

'It must be down somewhere in this damned jungle,' declared Bertie, bitterly.

'If that's what happened we haven't much hope of finding him. A heavy machine like a Hunter would go through the trees and into the ground like—' Biggles broke off, in a listening attitude. 'Hark! Can I hear something?'

Ram Singh, who had rejoined them, handed Biggles his knife. 'I can hear a plane,' he said simply.

'So can I,' muttered Biggles tersely.

Bertie scanned the sky. 'I don't see it.'

'We don't need to,' snapped Biggles. 'To hear it is enough. It must be flying low.'

Ram Singh ran back to his tree and scrambled up. From a high perch he looked in the direction from which the sound was coming. He thrust out a finger. 'There it is. I see it.'

'How far away?'

'A long way — two — three miles.'

'What's it doing?'

'Flying up and down; but it's edging this way.'

'Come down, quick,' ordered Biggles. To Bertie he said in a brittle voice: 'If that plane catches us on the ground we've had it — or our machine has.'

'What do we do?'

'Run for it. Come on.'

CHAPTER 11

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

They all raced towards the Auster, the drone of the unknown aircraft in their ears, the heat forgotten in the urgency of the situation. Even before they reached the machine Biggles was giving orders.

‘Take her off and get clear,’ he rapped out.

‘*Me* take her off?’

‘Yes. You.’

They pulled up, panting, at the door of the plane.

Bertie was looking flabbergasted. ‘What are *you* going to do?’

‘I’m staying here.’

‘Have you gone out of your mind?’

‘Do as I say and don’t argue. There isn’t time.’ He pointed. ‘Go that way and keep low. You should be able to get clear without being spotted. Get going. That machine is coming closer. Get in, Ram Singh.’

‘But — but —’ Bertie was still looking bewildered.

‘You know where I am. Come back for me tomorrow morning. Come over high. If you see a machine on the ground streak for home and have another look later. I shan’t leave here. If it’s safe for you to land I’ll make smoke. That’ll serve as a marker, too, in case you have any difficulty in finding the place.’

Still Bertie hesitated. ‘I don’t like this —’

‘Never mind what you like. I’m staying. I may see something that could answer our problem.’

‘What about food?’

‘I shall manage. All right. You can hand me out the Thermos and a packet of biscuits from the locker. Get cracking, or you’ll be too late.’

Realizing that Biggles’s mind was made up, Bertie waited no longer. He threw out the flask and the biscuits. ‘What shall I tell Akbar? He’ll wonder where you are.’

‘Tell him anything you like. Say I’m sick... think of something. ‘Ware Bula Din.’

‘So long.’ Bertie closed the door. The engine leapt to life. The Auster moved forward, the airscrew throwing up clouds of dust. Biggles ran aside to get clear of the slipstream. Out of the dust, he watched the Auster leave the ground, Bertie holding it down as ordered. In two minutes it was out of sight behind a fringe of trees.

As the sound of the engine faded, watching the sky in the other direction in case the unknown aircraft appeared, Biggles walked briskly, ready to run, to the edge of the jungle. Finding a place among some ferns in the shade, he sat down facing the airstrip. After mopping his sweating face with his

handkerchief, he gave himself a drink of the cold tea which the Thermos contained and with a sigh of relief relaxed. The last few minutes had been strenuous. He could still hear the unknown aircraft. It was coming nearer, but as yet it was not in sight. What was it doing? Looking for the airstrip?

He settled down to watch, and do some thinking. He had acted in haste, but he was satisfied he had done the right thing. In fact, it was the only thing if advantage was to be taken of a situation that had so unexpectedly arisen. For the moment he was content to rest.

For some time, perhaps twenty minutes, nothing happened. He could follow the course of the unknown aircraft, roughly, by the sound of its engine. It seemed to come and go. Once he thought it had gone altogether. Naturally, he was puzzled to know what it could be doing, and, indeed, began to wonder if its intention was to use the landing ground. However, he was convinced that in some way it was associated with Algy's disappearance. Otherwise the chances of an aircraft being so close, and flying so low, were too remote for serious consideration. In fact the whole curious business defied explanation.

The heat, even in the shade, was exhausting. After two disturbed nights Biggles was tired. These factors, combined with the monotonous drone of the aircraft, were conducive to sleep, and more than once he found himself nodding.

It was after such a moment that he saw, or thought he saw, a movement on the far side of the airstrip, on the edge of the valley. Where everything is still any movement however slight becomes conspicuous. He focused his eyes on the spot. He stared, and saw that he had not been mistaken. A man was standing there. He could not see him clearly on account of the shimmering, sun-tortured air near the ground. All he could be sure of was, the man was not white, or his face would stand out against the dark background. He carried something under his arm — a stick? No, decided Biggles. He was not holding the thing as a man would hold a stick. Tucked under his armpit it was more like a rifle, or a shot-gun. He was standing absolutely still, face raised as if watching the sky. His position was near, if not on the actual spot, where they had seen the bullet marks in the sand. He must have come up from the valley behind, Biggles told himself. He could not have walked over open ground to the position he now occupied without being seen.

Now although Biggles was there for no other purpose than to watch the place, the last thing he expected to see was a human being of any sort, alone and on foot. It was of course the plane that had occupied his mind. Without giving the matter any thought, he would have sworn he had the place to himself. There hadn't been a sound except that made by the aircraft. Indeed, for a few seconds he wondered if he had dropped off to sleep, or was imagining things. Were his eyes playing tricks? Was he being fooled by some play of light and shade on a tree, or a branch of one? In such conditions this sort of illusion is possible. The fact that the man did not move supported this possibility.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds to rest them from the strain of staring through the glare. Opening them he looked again. The man had gone. There was no one there; nothing that looked like a man.

Biggles was startled. It might be said he was shaken. Was he seeing things? Had he got 'a touch of the sun'? It could happen: does happen.

The shock of this had taken his mind off the aircraft and he suddenly became aware that it was close, closer than it had ever been before. He turned his eyes in the direction of the sound and almost at once saw it burst into view, flying at tree-top height. He did not recognize the type, although there were few aircraft he did not know. It was his job to know. Painted with a camouflage pattern of black, brown and green on a grey ground, somewhat like a commando uniform, it was a twin-engined, low wing, cabin monoplane. It had an unfamiliar 'cut' about it. With what interest he watched it can be imagined. This was what he had really been waiting for. Was it going to land? The answer, he judged, was yes.

It flew to the far end of the airstrip, banked steeply, and levelled out. The engines died. It glided in. The wheels, apparently on a fixed undercarriage, touched the ground and rumbled to a stop.

The events of the last few minutes, it need hardly be said, had banished drowsiness. This, Biggles hoped, would answer the mystery of the airstrip, and perhaps Algy's disappearance. At least, that was what he had good reason to believe.

The hope was dispelled by another shock. A rifle cracked, loud and clear. From where, it was impossible to guess; but he knew what had been the target, for he distinctly heard the *whang* of the bullet as it struck some metal part of the aircraft. There was a second shot. Biggles did not hear the bullet strike, so it may have missed its mark.

There may have been more shots, but if so he did not hear them. The reports would have been drowned in the bellow of the engines as the pilot, having had enough, slammed open the throttle and raced on into the air. Already half-way down the clear strip he had no room to spare, and Biggles instinctively held his breath as the undercarriage wheels just scraped over the surrounding trees, missing them by inches.

As the machine disappeared Biggles's eyes switched to the spot where he had seen a man. He no longer had any doubt about one being there. He was not to be seen. Not a movement. He must, Biggles reasoned, have been lying there all the time just over the lip of the valley, watching for the aircraft to arrive — just as he himself had done on the opposite side of the open ground.

He had a twinge of alarm when he realized how easily he might have been shot. Any of them. The Auster. They had been lucky. Presumably the man had not been there when they had landed.

Biggles felt sure that now the plane had gone the man would show himself. He did not. Still not a movement, not a sound except the drone of the departing machine. He stared until his eyes ached. The drone faded. Silence

returned. Still he lay motionless, watching, trying to work out what, these extraordinary happenings could mean. He could find no answer, beyond the obvious fact that the marksman, whoever he might be, was no friend of the man, or perhaps men, in the plane. The shooter must have seen the plane coming, or at any rate heard it, and deliberately lain in wait. Why?

This again was a question for which Biggles could find no answer. He felt completely baffled. The events he had witnessed, all of them, the man and the aircraft, were so unexpected that they left him slightly dazed. He felt he needed time to think. There had hardly been time to keep pace with things. Of one thing he was sure. The man who had shot at the plane was not there by accident. He was alone. What was he doing alone in the Terai? Big-game hunters might be there; but they would be in a party, with guides, beaters, and so on. Biggles thought about it for a long time, always watching the spot from which the lone marksman had appeared — and disappeared. He did not see him; and as far as his purpose was concerned he had to admit defeat. The whole thing was incomprehensible.

He stayed in his position until the sun was well down; which meant, in the tropics, that when night came it would fall quickly. Prompted by curiosity, he at last got up and started to make his way to the spot where he had seen the man. He did not of course risk walking across the open ground because for all he knew the man might still be there. He kept just inside the fringe of the jungle. What he really wanted to find out was if the man was still there. If so, he was faced by a new problem. How to prevent Bertie from landing when he returned the next morning. It was reasonable to suppose that if the mysterious marksman shot at one plane he would shoot at another. The Auster would come under fire as soon as it had landed, and Bertie would not know what to do. And without exposing himself, he, Biggles, would not be able to tell him. That was really why he was taking a calculated risk in trying to find out if the man was still there.

Towards the finish he had to hurry in order to reach his objective before dark. He approached with the caution the situation demanded, watching where he put his feet and pausing every few yards to listen. He saw nothing. He heard nothing. A close examination of the ground did not reveal the empty cartridge cases he thought he might find. He could only conclude the man had put them in his pocket. For some minutes he could find no sign that the man had ever been there.

He went on looking. It was nervous work, for he realized that if the man was still about, under cover, he might be shot at any moment without a chance to defend himself. His patience was rewarded when, looking over the brink of the valley, some flattened ferns showed him where the man had lain. Just behind these was a scar in the ground, the sort of mark a man's foot would make if he slipped. So the man had come up out of the valley, thought Biggles; and as he was no longer there, he had apparently departed the same way.

Biggles drew a deep breath of relief as the strain on his nerves relaxed. The man had gone. That, for the time being, was all he wanted to know. With darkness closing in fast, he had no intention of trying to track him. That, obviously, would be asking for trouble. He felt he had troubles enough without looking for more.

Thoughtfully he made his way back to his original position, taking a short cut across the open ground rather than the long walk round the way he had come. After a few uneasy minutes, still half expecting a shot to be fired at him, he reached his objective safely. A tribe of monkeys inspected him and scampered away.

There was nothing more he could do, so he prepared to make himself as comfortable as possible for the night. Finding a stick, he beat about the ferns to dislodge any snake or other venomous creature that might be there. Seeing nothing of the sort, he sank down to get some sleep. He wanted to be on his feet again at dawn. Tomorrow, he suspected, would be another tiring day. Anything could happen.

Somewhere in the jungle something coughed, to remind him where he was. He took no notice. He was too tired. He had slept in jungles before.

CHAPTER 12

BIGGLES IS WORRIED

Biggles was on the move while the stars were still in the sky. He had slept well, undisturbed, and felt refreshed. He drank a cup of cold tea from the lid of the flask, nibbled a biscuit, lit his first cigarette of the day and felt ready to tackle anything. With the air cool it was the best time of the day.

Bertie was his immediate problem, and taking time over his cigarette he considered it from every angle. He now regretted having said he would make smoke as a safe landing signal, but the arrangement having been made would have to stand. If he did make smoke it might bring along the man with a rifle. If the unknown sharp-shooter made a practice of shooting at aircraft, as it seemed from the way he had fired on the mystery plane almost before it had stopped, then it was reasonable to suppose he would shoot at the Auster. If he did not kill Bertie or Ram Singh he might punch a hole through the petrol tank or otherwise put the aircraft out of action.

Biggles was, in fact, well and truly on the horns of a dilemma. Unless he was to stay where he was for an indefinite period of time — and without food this was not seriously to be contemplated — sooner or later the Auster would have to land to pick him up. He did not particularly want to be picked up — not yet, anyway. He felt that the secret of the airstrip was within his grasp, and this he was sure was linked with Algy's disappearance. But he couldn't leave Bertie in the dark about what he had seen. If Bertie knew what had happened since his departure it would be a different matter; but he didn't know; and unless he landed he couldn't know. If he landed it might be in a trap. He was, pondered Biggles, probably worrying himself sick about the mystery plane and leaving him alone to deal with it.

However, he could see one gleam of hope. The gunman, if he was still about, might be some distance away. The arrival of the Auster, which he would hear, would no doubt bring him to the airstrip; even so, there might be time to explain the position to Bertie, and send him away, before any damage could be done.

Actually, at this moment Biggles was more concerned with the mystery plane than with the unknown gunman. The plane could not get to the place without being heard. The gunman could. Biggles could not forget the stealthy way he had appeared and then vanished. He realized of course that now the plane had been shot at it might not come back. Again, the gunman might have gone away. It was all very difficult.

Naturally, Biggles wondered what sort of man could be moving about in the jungle by himself; but he did not waste time in speculation that could only be futile. The point was, the man had been there. He might still be in the district. If so, he would have to be reckoned with. What was his object?

Where did he fit into the picture? If he merely had a grudge against aircraft he was not likely to discriminate between one type and another. Thus mused Biggles.

With the stars paling in the cloudless sky he had to make up his mind what he was going to do, and do it before broad daylight made movement more dangerous. He couldn't just sit there doing nothing, although had it had not been for Bertie and Ram Singh in the Auster, he would have been content to let things take their course.

He decided he would have to bring the Auster down. In this he would be making use of his one advantage. He knew about the gunman; but the gunman did not know there was someone else on the airstrip.

Briefly, Biggles's plan was this. Working on the assumption that the gunman would not come to the airstrip unless he heard a plane, he resolved to be in position before that could happen. It was unlikely Bertie would show up for another hour. No matter. He would take up his position and wait. As soon as he heard the Auster he would make the smoke signal. There was of course a risk of the gunman seeing the smoke, in which case he would come along to see what was happening. How long it would take him to reach the airstrip would depend on how far he was away. That is, supposing he was still in the region. He may have gone away altogether; but Biggles felt it would be unwise to reckon on this.

His plan resolved, he set off, not showing himself in the open but following the fringe of the jungle, mostly tall grass and dwarf palms. It was a long walk and it took him half an hour to reach his objective: the spot where the man had appeared out of the valley. He had to suppose that if the man showed up, the chances were it would be at the same spot. He approached cautiously, pistol in hand, looking and listening, every nerve alert, aware that in the jungle at this hour there were other dangers besides trigger-happy gunmen. He saw nothing; heard nothing, except the occasional call of a bird. The air was still, and for the most part the silence was profound. Wild animals on the prowl in search of a meal know better than to make a noise.

Reaching the spot — as near as he could judge — for which he had been making, he paused for some time, listening for any movement in the valley. Hearing nothing, he gathered some dry grass, twigs and a few green leaves. These he arranged in a heap in the open ready to make smoke when the time came to set fire to it. This done he returned to the lip of the valley, again to listen. Still not a sound. Reassured, he relaxed, feeling confident that however good a stalker the gunman might be, he could not get to the airstrip at that particular spot without making a sound.

So far so good. Nothing more could be done. Placing himself just over the edge of the valley, with the airstrip in full view, he settled down to wait. It was now a question of which came first; the Auster, the mystery plane, or the man with the rifle. He was prepared for any of them.

Time passed. The light grew stronger. The glare of the rising sun fell

across the barren earth of the landing ground. Still no sound came from the valley, or, for that matter, from the sky. Some vultures drifted high on rigid wings, otherwise nothing moved.

Bertie arrived on time, flying high as ordered. Biggles could hear the purr of the Auster some time before he was able to make out a lonely speck coming up from the south. It did not appear to be heading directly towards the airstrip, which caused Biggles some concern because Bertie must have seen it from the height at which he was flying. What was he doing? Biggles looked round the sky but could see nothing to account for Bertie taking such a course. He was gliding now, still without changing direction. Perhaps he was waiting for the smoke signal before coming too close, reasoned Biggles.

He ran out, put a light to the little fire he had prepared and returned to his position on the edge of the valley. From the fire a thin column of smoke went up as straight as a stone pillar. At once the Auster sideslipped off some altitude, from which it was reasonable to suppose that Bertie had spotted the signal. Biggles lost sight of the machine for a minute as it came from behind, the trees that rose from the valley cutting off his view. This, too, struck him as odd, because there was not a breath of wind, there was no reason why the Auster should not have come straight in. He was a little worried, too, because, although gliding, the aircraft was still making enough noise to drown the approach of the gunman should he be about.

However, the Auster glided in to a perfect landing, finishing its run not far from the expiring fire. Biggles ran out, waving, and beckoning Bertie to come nearer. A touch of the throttle brought the machine to him. The door was opened.

‘Don’t switch off,’ said Biggles tersely. ‘You may have to move. Get down. I must talk to you, and talk fast.’

Bertie jumped down, closely followed by Ram Singh. He looked startled. ‘What’s going on?’ he asked quickly. ‘What’s the idea of lighting two fires? For a moment you had me guessing.’

Biggles stared. ‘*Two* fires! What are you talking about? I only lit one.’

‘Sorry, old boy, but I could see two.’

‘Are you sure it wasn’t a wisp of mist?’

‘Quite sure. The sun’s been up too long for there to be any mist about. I saw smoke from a small fire, although I must admit it didn’t last long. I went to have a look. That’s why I came in the way I did. You wouldn’t see the smoke from here. It was coming up from the valley. I wondered what on earth you were doing there. Then I saw the smoke on the airstrip.’

‘Did you see anything in the valley?’

‘Not a bally thing. As I got near the fire went out as if someone had thrown a bucket of water over it. When I got to the spot I wasn’t absolutely certain where the smoke had been.’

‘No movement?’

‘Nothing. I did a quick circle and came on to the airstrip.’

‘It sounds as if someone in the valley didn’t want to be seen; and I fancy I know who it was. How far away from here was this smoke?’

‘A bit over a mile, for a rough guess. It seemed to come from the very bottom of the valley.’

‘Good. That should give us time to talk things over,’ said Biggles, shortly.

Bertie knitted his forehead. ‘You seem all wound up. Did you bump into a tiger, or something?’

‘Tigers were the least of my worries,’ retorted Biggles. ‘Listen. And listen hard, because we’ve no time to waste. There’s a man about here who doesn’t like planes. He shoots at ‘em on sight. The fire you saw in the valley may have been his. If so he must have heard you if he didn’t see you, in which case he’s probably on his way here with his musket. Don’t ask me who he is. I haven’t a clue. All I know is — at least, I’m pretty sure — this landing ground is tied up with the smuggling racket Algy was sent out to investigate. That’s why he came here. Just a minute.’ Biggles turned to Ram Singh. ‘Go a little way into the valley — not far — and if you hear anyone coming, let me know at once.’

Ram Singh obeyed.

Biggles turned back to Bertie and speaking softly went on. ‘I haven’t time to go into details now, but the plane that came over yesterday landed here. Or tried to. Before it could do what it came to do — whatever that may have been — a man, a coloured man, I think, jumped out of the valley and started shooting at it. That sent it off again. I haven’t seen it since. I couldn’t recognize it. The man who did the shooting never really showed himself. He was somewhere about here. I was on the far side. He didn’t see me. As soon as the plane had gone he bolted back into the valley. I watched all day, but he didn’t come back. Or if he did I didn’t see him. He must have heard you arrive, so he may be on his way here now to have a crack at you. Have your pistol handy. That’s the state of affairs at the moment.’

Bertie was listening, wide-eyed. ‘Well, so help me! What are you going to do about it?’

‘I’m going to stay here to watch what happens. I feel we’re in the middle of things and this is our chance to sort them out.’

‘Do you mean you’re going to stay here alone?’

‘That’s the big question and I’ve given it a lot of thought. We can’t afford to have the plane damaged, as it may be if this wild sharp-shooter spots it. I imagine he’ll do what he did yesterday. He must know what’s going on here. He may know what happened to Algy. If we could grab him we might get the truth out of him. How do you feel about staying?’

‘That suits me, old boy. Two could handle this business better than one.’

‘I can see that, but it’s the Auster that worries me. It will have to be put out of sight. I’ll tell you what. Take it over to the far side and tuck it in as far as you can get into the jungle. Hide it as well as you can. There’s plenty of grass and scrub. Chuck some on the top in case that other plane comes over again.

When you've done that come back here. Get cracking. If that man we're after is on his way it won't be long before he's here. He'll find us waiting for him.'

'I get it.' Bertie got back into the Auster and taxied tail up to the far side of the airstrip. There he switched off and spent some minutes doing rough camouflage, breaking up the outline of the machine with fallen branches, grass, dwarf palm fronds, ferns, anything that came to hand. This done, he ran back. 'I opened up a bit so that anyone hearing me might think I'd taken off again.'

'Good idea. Keep your voice down. We don't want anyone to hear us talking. All we have to do now is lie low and wait for our friend with the rifle to arrive.'

'Did he hit that machine yesterday when he shot at it?'

'Yes. At least once. I heard the bullet strike metal. He must be a pretty good shot.'

'I wonder he didn't wait for someone to get out and then have a crack at him.'

'I can only think he didn't want the plane here. It seemed he was content to drive it off.'

'Those bullet marks we saw in the sand may have been fired by him, or at him.'

'That thought crossed my mind. With any luck we should soon know — if we can grab him and get him to talk. I don't see why he shouldn't talk, since obviously he's not one of the gang operating here. He'd hardly shoot at his friends. Did everything go off all right with you at the aerodrome?'

'No trouble at all. No one asked after you. Akbar was away when I landed and that little swine Bula Din was minding the office.'

'Did you see Holman Larta?'

'Yes. He's on the sick list.'

'With what?'

'I don't know. All I know is he rolled up in a car with his arm in a sling. The car didn't stop. When I last saw him he was on his way to the office. He looked pretty seedy. I asked him if he'd had an accident. He didn't answer; just walked on, which I thought was a bit odd.'

'I wonder,' said Biggles, softly.

'Wonder what?'

'If he could have been in that plane that came here yesterday. If he was in it his arm may have got in the way of a bullet.'

Bertie raised his eyebrows. 'What on earth put that idea in your head?'

'I was only thinking that had he been involved in an ordinary accident there was no reason why he shouldn't have told you about it. He's usually ready to talk. Why the secrecy? If he's in the smuggling racket he might have been in that plane. Anyway, it's something to know he's out of action for the time being. But that's enough talking. If this fellow we're after heard us it would be fatal. He'd either stalk us and take a shot at us, or clear off and not

come back. I'll call Ram Singh in now. He can stay with me. I may need an interpreter. You move along a little way. Keep out of sight; keep still and be prepared to move fast.'

They found suitable places under cover of the lip of the valley and waited. Silence fell; a hot, attentive silence. On the far side of the landing ground a sambur appeared, browsing. There was no other sign of life.

CHAPTER 13

MAHOMAD KHAN

Minutes dragged by in a silence that seemed unnatural. There might not have been a living creature for miles; but Biggles knew better. The sambur had faded into the jungle. The landing ground lay deserted under a sun that had now climbed high enough into a cloudless sky to make itself felt.

‘He isn’t coming,’ breathed Bertie. ‘He should have been here by now; that’s if he started when I flew over.’

Biggles did not answer. A cobra had appeared out of the sun-dried grass a dozen yards away and was gliding with effortless ease to an unknown destination. It did not come nearer, although once it raised itself as if it had sensed the presence of the men lying on the bank of the valley with only their heads and shoulders showing above the edge.

‘Look here, old boy, this isn’t getting us anywhere,’ protested Bertie. ‘How long are we staying here?’

‘Till something happens,’ answered Biggles. ‘We’ve nothing better to do.’

Ram Singh, lying with his chin cupped in his hands, looking out across the airstrip, moved sharply, inclining his head towards the valley.

‘What is it?’ asked Biggles.

‘I thought I heard something, a sort of rustle.’

Biggles half turned to listen, but the sound was not repeated. ‘It could have been an animal,’ he said softly. ‘The forest down below must be alive with game of one sort or another.’

His opinion was more or less confirmed when a few minutes later a leopard appeared on the open ground. It had come up from the valley. It stood still, looking back, flicking its tail. It showed its teeth, turned and trotted off, keeping close to the jungle.

‘Something must have disturbed him,’ Biggles said. ‘And from the way he behaved I’d say it was a man. Nothing else would be likely to worry him.’

‘He didn’t see us,’ Ram Singh said.

‘He may have caught our taint. He wouldn’t be likely to interfere with us unless we got in his way.’

‘I’ve heard of leopards becoming man-eaters.’

‘Don’t worry. Man-eaters hang about villages where there’s plenty of meat. As we must be miles from the nearest village. I’d be surprised to find one here.’

Nothing more was said. The cobra and the leopard had disappeared and the airstrip resumed its atmosphere of desolation.

It was some minutes later that Bertie moved sharply and turned startled eyes to Biggles’s face. There was no need to say anything.

‘I can hear it,’ murmured Biggles.

Unmistakably through the still air, as yet distant, came the deep growl of an aero engine. It was increasing swiftly in volume.

‘It’s coming here,’ said Bertie.

‘That’s what it sounds like. And this time it isn’t messing about on the way. Keep your head down.’

The growl became a roar, shattering after the long silence.

A minute later the aircraft burst into view, flying flat out and only just above tree-top level.

‘That’s the fellow who came here yesterday,’ stated Biggles in a normal voice, knowing that the noise would drown his words. ‘It’ll be interesting to see just what he intends to do.’

It was soon demonstrated that ‘interesting’ was hardly the right word.

At a height of twenty feet the aircraft raced along the border of the landing strip on the valley side. The instant it reached the valley the engine noise was joined by the snarling chatter of a speeded-up machine-gun. Biggles just had time to cry ‘Look out!’ and throw himself farther down the bank, when the hail of bullets reached the spot where they had been lying. They swept along the edge of the valley kicking up dry earth and grass and slashing into the branches of trees, bringing down a shower of bark, chips and leaves. Then the plane had passed on, its gun still hammering as it raked the edge of the valley. It had all happened in a few short seconds.

‘What the devil—!’ gasped Bertie. ‘What’s he shooting at? He couldn’t have seen us.’

‘Impossible at the rate he was going. He was shooting blind.’

‘That’s a military job. Piston engine.’

‘No markings, military or civil, apart from its camouflage. That makes it an outlaw. The gun must have been mounted somewhere amidships. That means at least two men on board. The pilot couldn’t have used a front gun at the angle he was flying. Look out! He’s coming back. Keep low.’

At the end of the airstrip the unknown aircraft had swung round in a tight turn and now repeated its devastating performance. The second dose was the same as the first, plastering the ground and the trees. The pattern of the shots was wide, as it was bound to be, fired from a gun mounted on a moving and probably vibrating platform, and only a few came near the watchers.

‘What the devil does he think he’s doing?’ muttered Bertie, removing a splinter from the back of his hand. ‘He can’t know we’re here.’

‘He’s obviously got an idea there’s somebody here. I’d say he was hoping to dislodge the chap who shot at him yesterday.’

‘He hasn’t much hope of hitting him with that sort of shooting.’

‘Maybe not, but he’s making it damned uncomfortable. Good thing for us we were well down the bank, although I must admit I wasn’t expecting anything like that. Had we been caught in the open, it wouldn’t have been funny.’

‘But what’s their object in shooting up the place?’

‘I can think of only one. He has some reason for wanting to land. Yes. Here he comes. Now we may learn what this is all about. Keep well down and keep still. If they spot us we’re likely to get another packet.’

Biggles’s prophecy proved correct. They did see something; but it was certainly not among the possibilities he had had in mind. In the speed of events he had completely forgotten the unknown gunman, wherefore the next development provided a shock as great as the first.

The aircraft had cut its engines and was now making an approach run with the obvious intention of landing. It was at this moment that from somewhere near at hand, clear and loud above the hum of the gliding machine, came the crack of a rifle. It was followed by more in quick succession. Biggles counted ten. This meant the magazine was empty and the gunman would have to reload.

The crew of the aircraft could not have heard the shots, although they would of course know what was happening should a bullet hit the machine; and from what followed this is what must have happened. The engines came on with a roar. The machine climbed steeply to a hundred feet, made a spectacular climbing turn and now using its front gun again raked the lip of the valley. It zoomed over the trees and disappeared from sight. The roar began to fade. ‘He’s gone,’ Bertie said.

‘Keep still,’ said Biggles quietly. ‘He may come back. He must have a thundering good reason for wanting to land here to go to all this trouble.’

But when the drone continued to recede he crawled quickly to the top of the bank — under which they were all still taking cover, and without showing too much of himself, peeped out. Ignoring the open ground, his eyes looked along the edge of the valley in the direction from which the shots had come.

Twenty yards away a short, sturdy, brown-skinned man was just stepping clear of the trees. He was staring at the sky whence still came the drone of the departing aircraft, which meant that his back was towards Biggles. He held a rifle in both hands as if ready to use it. A sheathed *kukri* hung by his side. He wore old khaki shorts and what looked like the tattered remains of an army tunic. On his head was a dilapidated felt hat with a floppy brim.

So much Biggles saw at a glance. Pistol in hand he advanced swiftly and silently. Quiet though he had been the man must have heard him, unless he was prompted by instinct, for he spun round, to look into the muzzle of Biggles’s gun.

‘Drop the rifle,’ ordered Biggles curtly.

‘To drop a rifle is bad for it,’ was the cool answer. The rifle, an old army pattern, was placed carefully on some dry grass.

‘Who are you?’ demanded Biggles, looking into a brown face of some age, for the skin was wrinkled like a walnut. The expression was calm and wore a certain dignity. It showed neither fear nor surprise.

‘Mahomad Khan, *Subahdar*,¹ is my name, sir,’ was the quiet reply.

‘*Subahdar*! Have you been a soldier?’

‘Twenty-two years’ service. Do I speak with Captain Bigglesworth?’

To say that Biggles was amazed to hear his name spoken in such a place by a man who had never seen him before, would be to put it mildly. He was, to use a common expression, completely flabbergasted. For a moment he could only stare, speechless, while his brain groped for words. But he was not tongue-tied for long.

‘How do you know my name?’ he managed to get out.

‘We saw your plane pass over.’

‘Who’s we?’

‘Me and Mr Lacey.’

‘Lacey!’ Biggles could hardly believe his ears. His voice cracked with incredulity. ‘When?’

‘This morning.’

‘Are you saying Mr Lacey is here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Alive?’ Biggles realized this was a foolish question as the word left his lips.

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘Where is he?’

The old soldier pointed. ‘Down there in the valley, where he fell and I found him.’

‘Why does he stay there?’

‘He is hurt.’

‘Badly?’

‘Yes. He has a broken leg and many cuts and bruises.’

By this time, hearing the talking, Bertie and Ram Singh had come up. ‘Wonderful news,’ cried Biggles. ‘Algy’s alive. He’s here.’

Bertie threw his cap in the air with a shout of ‘hooray’.

‘He’s hurt,’ informed Biggles.

‘Let’s get to him.’

‘Just a minute.’ Turning back to the ex-subahdar he said: ‘Why did you shoot at that plane?’

‘To make it go away. We don’t want it here.’

‘Do the people in it know Mr Lacey is alive?’

‘They don’t know. I think they want to know. They sent him down. Now they are looking always for the crashed plane.’

‘How did you come into this?’

‘I see it happen. I was here, hunting. I have a pension, but I come to the Terai to make extra money with skins of tiger, leopard, crocodile. When I was young I was a famous *shikari*. The officers who wanted to bag a tiger came to me.’ The old man spoke proudly but modestly.

‘Did you see Mr Lacey’s plane come down?’ inquired Biggles.

‘Yes. I went to the place. I thought he must be dead; but he was alive, so I stayed with him and did my best to mend him.’

‘Good. Now you can take me to him. Is he far from here?’

‘One mile perhaps, but the path is difficult.’

‘Just a moment.’ Biggles turned to Bertie. ‘What about you? I’m thinking of the Auster.’

‘Won’t it be all right where it is?’

Biggles looked dubious. ‘That plane might come back and land. Had the Auster been spotted just now, we can guess what it would be like now.’

‘Not come again today,’ Mahomad said. ‘They know I am here.’

‘Has it been here before?’

‘Many times.’

‘There’s nowhere else it can land?’

‘Not for many miles.’

Biggles turned back to Bertie. ‘All right. We’ll risk it. Dash across and fetch the medicine chest. While you’re at it you might bring one or two tins from the emergency locker. Condensed milk, for instance. Ram can give you a hand. I’ll wait here. Be as quick as you can. I can hardly wait to see Algy.’

Bertie and Ram Singh set off at a trot to where the Auster was hidden.

‘Is Mr Lacey still in danger?’ Biggles asked the old soldier while they waited.

‘Not now, I think. At first I think he must die. He is hurt much bad. Now he gets strong quickly. When I see him under pieces of the plane I think he is dead. The engine is on his leg. I have to dig under him to get him out.’

‘And you stayed with him?’

‘Of course. In my regiment we do not leave a wounded man.’

‘How long ago did this happen?’

‘By the moon, one month.’

‘How did you manage for food?’

‘A *shikari* knows where to find food in the jungle. Twice I go home for some things, like flour for *chapattis*.’²

‘Where is your home?’

‘In Nepal. Not far.’

‘How far?’

‘Ten miles. I go there and back in one day.’

‘Did you tell anyone what you had seen?’

‘No. I live alone. I did not want talk about it in case the people who shoot down Lacey hear of it. The plane looks for him.’

‘I’m surprised they didn’t spot the crash from the air.’

‘When Lacey falls he comes through the big trees like a bullet which breaks his plane to many pieces. You will see.’

‘Do you know who flies this plane you shoot at?’

‘No.’

‘You’ve no idea?’

‘No idea.’

‘You don’t know where it comes from?’

‘No.’

‘Had you seen it before?’

‘Many times.’

‘And it lands here?’

‘Yes. It was not my business. I think Lacey *sahib* knows why it comes, but he does not talk to me about it. For a time he is in much pain. I do what I can for him. Wash wounds, make splints for his leg.’

‘Is his leg still in splints?’

‘Yes. But I think they may soon come off.’

‘But he isn’t able to move yet?’

‘Not yet. Just a little, but not to walk. This morning he moved by crawling to look at the plane flying low over us. When he sees it he cries out it is a friend looking for him. He knows the plane. He tells me your name.’

‘That was lucky. It was the smoke from your fire that brought the plane over you.’

‘That is what I thought. I put out the fire quickly.’

‘Would it be possible to carry him up here?’

‘Just possible perhaps, but difficult. You will know when you see him, and how thick is the jungle in the valley. I have made a path up here only for one man walking alone.’

Bertie and Ram Singh returned with bulging pockets, breathing heavily after running most of the way.

‘Good work,’ Biggles said. ‘Now, *Subahdar*, lead on.’

The party set off, taking a diagonal course, in single file, down a bank that was soon too steep for a direct descent. The trees, becoming taller and more luxuriant, entwined their branches overhead to produce the green twilight of a tropical forest.

The difficulties of trying to carry a wounded man up the slope were soon apparent. The ground was soft under a deep layer of rotting vegetation, as is usual in such places. There was no path, merely a line of footmarks winding round obstructions such as fallen trees, always downward. From somewhere below came the babble of running water. So bad was the going in places that it became easy to see why Mahomad Khan had taken so long to reach the airstrip after seeing the Auster and hearing it land. It was this, he explained later, that had taken him up to the landing ground. Not the unknown aircraft. It just happened that he arrived, and was looking for the Auster, when the other machine appeared.

The floor of the valley was reached without mishap. It was not very wide and had been rolled flat by ages of spates in the monsoon season. At the moment, the river, which occupied most of it, was now no more than a brook a few yards wide lined with a marvellous display of flowers, tropical ferns and an occasional patch of rushes.

But Biggles was not interested in the natural beauty of the place. Mahomad Khan had stopped, pointing, and it was not necessary to look far for the

reason. In front of them stretched a broad line of aircraft debris: twisted metal, longerons and engine cowling, cable wire... The tail end of a fuselage, battered almost out of recognition, rested upright against a tree. Hanging vertically from the same tree was part of a wing.

‘Good grief!’ breathed Biggles, in a shocked voice. ‘What a mess.’

‘How anyone got out of that alive beats me,’ muttered Bertie shaking his head.

‘The trees must have saved him. The wings would absorb a lot of the impact as they were shorn off,’ observed Biggles.

‘Not far now,’ said Mahomad Khan.

As they walked on, following him along the little stream, Bertie remarked: ‘I’m not surprised I didn’t see anything like a plane when I flew over this morning.’

¹ *Subahdar*. A Hindi word. A native officer commanding a native regiment in India.

² *Chapattis*. Flat cakes made of unleavened wheat flour, much used in India.

CHAPTER 14

HOW IT HAPPENED

The trail of fragments that had once been an aeroplane continued for some little distance; then, rounding a bend in the brook, they came upon the rest of it. On a small flat area of rough turf, at the foot of some giant trees, part of a fuselage, half a wing that had been torn off at the roots, an elevator, together with some tall rushes and palm fronds, had been arranged to form a shelter. The front was open. On a bed of dry fern, his head and shoulders supported by a pillow of the same material, a heavily bandaged leg stuck out in front of him, lay a man.

Had Biggles not been told who he was he would not have recognized Algy. When he saw him he stopped, shocked by his appearance, although, to be sure, he had not expected to find him looking his ordinary self. His face was pale and painfully thin and drawn. His hair was long and tangled; a month's growth of beard covered his jaw; a cut on the forehead, and another across his cheek, not fully healed, did nothing to improve matters. His clothes were rags. However, his eyes were bright, and he greeted the visitors with a grin and a cheerful: 'So Mahomad found you. Am I glad to see you! You were a long time finding me.'

Smiling, Biggles dropped beside him and squeezed his hand. 'We should never have found you had not Mahomad brought us here. This is the last place I'd have looked for you. You talk as if you expected us.'

'Naturally. I knew that when you heard I was missing you wouldn't be long getting to India.'

'Well, here we are. All we have to do now is get you home. How do you feel, generally?'

'Not too bad. It's this leg that is holding me up. Otherwise there's nothing much wrong.'

'You must have had a pretty thin time.'

'It would have been a lot thinner had not Mahomad come along. Make no mistake about that. I must be the luckiest man in the world to still be alive. When I hit the deck Mahomad was probably the only man within miles. As you may have noticed, the Terai isn't exactly swarming with people. He's looked after me like a long-lost son. Nothing too much trouble. When the Auster came over this morning and I saw the registration, I realized you'd spotted the airstrip. I heard the machine land and asked Mahomad to nip up and tell you where I was. What was all the shooting?'

'It seems other people are using the landing ground and they don't want anyone else there.'

'Are you telling me? I know all about that. We'll come to that presently. Is the Auster still up top?'

‘Yes. Bertie brought it in. I was already here.’

‘Will it be safe?’

‘I don’t know. It’s camouflaged as far as Bertie and Ram Singh could do it; but I must admit that as things are I’m worried about it. It would be dangerous to leave it there, but what else can we do? Mahomad says it wouldn’t be possible yet to get you to it.’

‘He’s probably right. It’s this confounded leg. I think it was a double fracture and Mahomad could only do an emergency job. He gave me hell setting it, but it was the only thing to do. I’d better not take any chances with it or I might find myself in a worse mess than I’m in now. It beats me that you were able to track me to the airstrip.’

‘It wasn’t too difficult when we learned from Ram Singh the direction in which you’d been working. It’s probably the only landing ground in the Terai. Actually, I didn’t expect to find you on it, but I thought by watching it we might get a clue as to what had happened to you. How did you manage to get yourself shot down?’

‘They were too clever for me, or too well organized.’

‘The smuggling gang?’

‘Yes. But I haven’t finished with them yet.’

‘You can’t do much at the moment, laddie. The first thing is to get you on your feet and out of here.’

‘That may be a week or more. Are you going to stay here?’

‘One of us will stay.’

‘What about the Auster? If the crooks who use this place find it that’ll be the end of it. Then we shall all be up a gum tree.’

‘For the present Mahomad seems to be keeping them at a distance with his rifle.’

‘He can’t stay up there all the time. They’ll be back. This place is an important link in their set-up.’

‘Do you know who they are?’

‘I know one of ‘em, the one who actually carries the gold. And when I tell you how he does it, you won’t be surprised that no one has rumbled him yet.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Holman Larta.’

‘Ah! We’ve met him.’

‘Where?’

‘On the airfield at Shara. Fellow with a wooden leg. He told us he was in big business.’

‘Yes. Running contraband gold. He’s a murdering scoundrel. He tried to kill me.’

‘Another one of the gang, Bula Din, who works in the office, tried to kill us.’

‘Ah. So you know about him!’

‘We have good reason to. But we’re going round in circles. I think the best

thing would be for you to tell us what you know, starting at the beginning. Then we'll tell you what we've been doing. We should then get a clear picture of how things stand. That should enable us to decide on what to do next.'

'All right. Let's do that. I'll start.'

While this conversation had been going on, Mahomad had rekindled his fire and with the provisions Bertie and Ram Singh had brought prepared a simple meal which in the absence of plates and dishes, could be eaten with the fingers. Biscuits smeared with condensed milk or meat cubes was the staple item. A single bowl enabled Algy to have some soup. When they had finished this not very exciting repast, Biggles invited Algy to begin the story of his adventures which had ended in his present predicament. 'First of all,' he said, 'to satisfy my curiosity, tell me this. Has Larta really got a *wooden* leg?'

'Not a wooden one,' replied Algy, with a curious smile. 'An artificial one. Which is not the same thing. A wooden leg is solid. Larta's leg is hollow. It makes a useful receptacle. Would you like to see what he carries in it?'

'Very much.'

Algy felt in the breast pocket of his torn jacket and produced a small yellow object which he held out on the palm of his hand. Unmistakably it was an English sovereign.

'Not just one of these,' went on Algy. 'Hundreds. I don't know exactly how many. Simple, isn't it?'

'Well, I'll go hopping!' Biggles said slowly. 'No wonder he limps with all that weight on board.'

'He limps worse when the leg is full than when it's empty,' stated Algy, grinning at Biggles's expression.

'How on earth did you get on to this?' asked Biggles.

'You'll hear when I tell you my story,' replied Algy. 'I'd better get on with it while things are quiet.' He continued: 'When the Air Commodore asked me to come here and help to get this gold smuggling racket sorted out, because you couldn't be spared, I knew it wasn't going to be easy, otherwise there would have been no point in India calling for outside assistance. Had I known how sticky it was going to be, I'd have made some excuse for crying off.'

'When a member of the Commonwealth asks us for help we try to oblige. You couldn't very well refuse. The thing was getting out of hand and someone with experience was needed to deal with it. Remember, some countries were hinting that people in Great Britain were providing the gold for political reasons.'

'That's a lot of nonsense. I know that now.'

'I hope you can prove it.'

'I think I could have done that given a few more days. I'm pretty sure the people I was up against knew that. Larta was one of them, or he wouldn't have tried to poison me.'

'Poison?'

'Yes. And he might well have succeeded. It happened like this. I met him

first at Dum Dum.¹ That was before I moved up to Shara. A few days later he arrived, all very nice and affable. Chatting in the lounge at the rest-house, he mentioned that, among other things, he held an import licence for Scotch whisky. Well, as you know, I'm not much for whisky, so I wasn't really interested. Later that evening a boy came along and presented me with a half bottle with Mr Larta's compliments. I didn't touch it.'

'Were you suspicious of it?'

'Frankly, no. It looked genuine enough. Thinking he might ask me how I liked it, and not wanting to appear churlish, I opened the bottle and poured out a little to make it look as if I'd had a peg. It happened that in my room there were some flowers in a glass vase. I poured a little of the whisky into the vase. Later, as I was getting into bed I noticed that the flowers looked pretty sick. I didn't pay much attention. But when, in the morning, as I was dressing, I saw they were stone dead, I did some thinking. Being anxious to get in the air, not knowing what to do with the bottle, I left it on the table. When I got back that evening I learned that the house boy who had been doing my room had been taken ill. I looked at the whisky bottle. The whisky was down half an inch.'

'Did the boy die?'

'I don't know. He'd been rushed to hospital and I've heard nothing of him since.'

'Did you mention this to anyone?'

'No. What good would it have done to raise a stink by saying Larta had tried to poison me?'

'Did Larta mention the whisky?'

'Yes. He had the cool nerve to ask me how I liked it.'

'What did you say?'

'I said I hadn't tried it yet, which was true, and lucky for me. But I'm getting a bit off course. To come back: maybe I wasn't very clever over this smuggling business, but from the start I was up against the difficulty of not knowing who was to be trusted; to whom I could talk without word getting back to the gang of what I was doing. I realize now they were keeping tabs on me all the time — and there was nothing wrong with their intelligence service.'

'People in their line of business can't afford to be careless,' put in Biggles dryly.

Algy resumed. 'I'll skip over my early efforts, but as I worked things out everything pointed to the gold being brought in by air from the north. By whom I didn't know. I still don't know. There's a lot of aviation over India these days. Was a private plane being used? Was the stuff being smuggled by employees of the various operating companies — Air India, Indian Air Lines, Pakistan International Airlines, and the rest? As you know, I shifted my base to Shara, to be nearer the scene of operations, as I thought, and from there set out to do some systematic exploring. I didn't really know what I was looking for, but when I spotted in the Terai a landing strip that wasn't shown on any

of the latest maps — the one above us here — I felt I was on the track. And I was.'

'It might have been shown on an old map,' interposed Biggles.

'I didn't think of that. When I landed it looked to me as if it hadn't been there long. The question was what to do next. Should I report what I knew, or try to get more concrete evidence? The position was complicated by the fact that, as the airstrip was not on a regular route, and not on the map, I didn't know whether it was in India or Nepal. The Indian Customs people had given me a free hand, and every possible assistance, so I didn't want to repay them by starting an international incident. You know how touchy people are about frontiers, their air space, and so on.'

Biggles nodded. 'I can see how you were fixed.'

'I decided to say nothing and press on, regardless, on my own. I would watch the airstrip to check if it was being used, and if so, by whom. I watched for three days without anything happening.'

'You mean, from the air?'

'No. I didn't want to be seen. I flew over at the crack of dawn, landed, ran to the extreme end of the strip and put the machine into the jungle as far as it would go. This was my Auster, of course. I did a bit of camouflaging and then parked myself, with the binoculars, in a position from which I could watch without being seen. It was on the fourth day that I clicked. A machine came in; a type I've never seen before. Painted green and brown and black in a camouflage pattern. No markings of any sort.'

Biggles tapped the ash off the cigarette he had lighted. 'I know the one. It was here this morning.'

'It didn't stay long,' continued Algy. 'It finished its run uncomfortably close to where I was squatting; however, I wasn't seen. One man got out. He carried a bag — a small sack. It looked heavy. He put it under a bush and went back to the machine, which then departed, having been on the ground for about five minutes. What had happened was pretty obvious. The bag had been put there to be collected by someone. I nipped along to see what was in it. It turned out to be an ordinary little bag of tough canvas, the top tied with a piece of cord. I opened it. What did I find?'

A smile crept slowly over Biggles's face. 'A lot of nice yellow sovereigns.'

'Don't jump the gun,' protested Algy. 'But of course, I had already told you. I didn't trouble to count the coins, but for a guess I'd say there must have been close on five hundred. They weren't all sovereigns. I noticed an American twenty dollar gold piece. I kept a sovereign for proof of what I'd seen, left the bag where it was and went back to my hide-out. I now had another problem. Should I leave the gold there or take it away? What would you have done?'

'I would have left it where it was to see who collected it.'

'Good. Then I was right. That's what I did. Who do you think came to collect it?'

Biggles's smile broadened. 'None other than the gent who tried to poison you, Mr Holman Larta.'

Algy made a gesture of disgust. 'You're spoiling my story.'

'You'd as good as told me,' reminded Biggles.

'Okay. Fair enough. Hardly was I back in my place than what should come sailing in but an old Rapide wearing Indian civil aviation registration letters. I made a note of them. It knew exactly where to go, so it must have been there before. Straight to the crock of gold where a rainbow must have ended. The engine was switched off. Two men got out. One was Larta. The other, presumably the pilot, I didn't know. I took him to be an Indian or Pakistani, but he might just as easily have been any other oriental type. Larta fetched the bag. Naturally, I expected him to put it in the plane. Oh no. When he started taking off his trousers I wondered what on earth he was going to do. When he sat down and took off his leg from the hip I wondered still more. I still didn't guess the answer. But when, quite casually, as if it was the normal thing to do, the two of them started to fill the leg with the yellow shekels, the penny dropped. Brother, you could have knocked me flat with a lump of candy floss.'

Everyone laughed. 'I can believe that, old boy,' Bertie said.

'When the job was finished,' resumed Algy, 'with the help of his pal — the leg now being a lot heavier than it had been — Larta put his leg back on. The pilot put the empty bag under the bush and away they went. Well, there it was. So simple. Someone was bringing in the gold in the form of coins. All Larta had to do was pick it up. He could go where he liked. No one, not even Customs officers, would be likely to ask him to take his leg off. But wait a minute before you all talk at once. I haven't finished yet. They say wonders never cease. As I sat there in the grass, well satisfied with my morning's work, another extraordinary thing happened. This seems to be a place where anything can happen, where the unexpected is always waiting to bowl you over. I never came nearer to being bowled over, and that's a fact.'

1 Dum Dum. The airport for Calcutta. About 9 miles from the town.

CHAPTER 15

EXPLANATIONS AND A PLAN

Algy continued. 'The noise of the Rapide taking off — I think that's what it must have been — disturbed a leopard. It ran out of the jungle on to the airstrip. It must have been close to me. There it sat, after a look round, washing its face like a cat. Pretty to watch. I didn't take much notice of it, being too busy thinking about what I'd just seen. Suddenly a gunshot made me jump. I know now that it was Mahomad shooting at the leopard. He's told me so. I happened to be in the line of fire and he damn nearly hit me. The bullet whistled past my ear. Of course, he didn't know I was there. He couldn't see me sitting in the long grass. I heard the bullet hit my machine, which wasn't far behind me.'

'You thought someone was shooting at you,' said Biggles.

'What else was I to think? I went flat and waited. I waited for a long time. No one appeared. The leopard of course had made off at the sound of the shot. On that occasion I didn't see Mahomad. After a while I got up and had a look at the Auster. I couldn't find any damage. In fact, I never found the bullet mark.'

'We found it,' informed Biggles. 'We went over your machine thoroughly as soon as we got to Shara. We assumed someone had taken a crack at you. No other thought occurred to us. Which shows one should never take anything for granted. But carry on with the story. What did you do next?'

'Thinking I had all the evidence I needed, I flew straight to Calcutta and reported what I knew to the Minister of Customs and Excise — the man responsible for me being sent out — supposing that would be the end as far as I was concerned. There was no reason why he shouldn't cast his net right away — or so I imagined. But no. He wanted everyone in it. More than anything he wanted to know the nationality of the plane dumping the gold in the Terai; or where it was coming from. For political reasons that was most important. It would provide the reason for the gold being sent to India. There seems to be some doubt as to whether the airstrip is in India or Nepal, but he wasn't worried about that. The gold was finding its way into India; that was all he cared.'

'I can see his point,' said Biggles. 'If the gold is being brought in, in the form of sovereigns, it may have started the rumour that Britain was responsible. That goes for America, too, with the dollars. That's how misunderstandings can cause mischief. But never mind that. How were you supposed to find out who the unknown plane belonged to?'

'There seemed to be only one way and that was by waiting for it and track it to its base. I pointed out I couldn't do that in an Auster. It wasn't fast enough. He offered to lend me a Hunter. He then shook me to the roots by

suggesting it wouldn't be a bad idea if I shot the machine down, or plastered it on the airstrip to prevent it from getting away. The nationality of the plane could then be determined and its purpose proved beyond doubt.'

Biggles looked startled. '*Shoot it down!*'

'That's what he hinted.'

'By thunder! He was sticking his neck out.'

'Maybe. But he had a sound argument. This gold runner was a criminal. The metal was being brought in from outside India. In that case it could hardly be an Indian machine. Even if it was, should it be shot down it would be a purely domestic affair. If it was a foreigner the country concerned wouldn't dare to kick up a fuss because if it did it would have to explain what the aircraft was doing over Indian territory. In fact, they wouldn't know what had happened to the machine because India would be under no obligation to say anything about it.'

'Well, there's something in that,' agreed Biggles. 'The Indian authorities must be getting tough. Maybe they're learning that if you want to keep things under control there are occasions when you have to be tough. Just praying for people to be good and kind doesn't get you anywhere. So you came along in a Hunter to put in a spot of combat practice.'

'Like old times, what?' put in Bertie, smiling.

'I didn't intend to do any shooting unless it was forced on me. The scheme, my scheme, was to tail the machine to see where it was coming from. That was the intention, but I never got as far as that. Through its spies the gang must have got word of what was afoot. I collected the Hunter at Dum Dum and took it to Shara. It must have been there that the mischief was done.'

'Mischief?'

'Sabotage. It couldn't have been anything else. The machine was all right when I took it over. I tested everything myself. On my way here, when I had gone too far to turn back the engine started to heat up. I suspect something had been put in the fuel, or oil; or maybe someone had put a handful of sand in the gear-box; soon I was in real trouble. She was smoking like a ruddy furnace. Over that hilly area south of the Terai there was nowhere to get down. I throttled back and hung on hoping to reach the airstrip, although there isn't much room on it for a Hunter to get down. But it was my only chance of avoiding a serious crack-up. I nearly made it. I think I would have just got to it, but at the last minute, when I was side-slipping in over the valley to keep the smoke from blinding me, the machine I was hoping to track came down on me out of the sun like a ton of bricks. I caught a glimpse of it. In the position I was in I hadn't a hope. It fired a long burst at me. The Hunter may have been hit. I don't know. Instinctively I opened the throttle to take evasive action, whereupon the engine blew her top. The Hunter fell out of my hands and ploughed into the trees. That's all I remember. When I came round I was on the ground with Mahomad here working on me, using his *puggaree* for bandages. That's all. I've been here ever since with Mahomad playing nurse,

cook and bodyguard. Without him, by this time I'd have been a heap of bones.'

'Didn't the other machine see where you went down?' asked Biggles.

'It couldn't have done, because from the way it's been quartering the locality I can only conclude it's been looking for me.'

'There isn't much to see from the air. Bertie didn't see you this morning. All he saw was smoke from your fire. That could have shown where you were.'

'We were always listening. As soon as we heard an aircraft the fire was doused. Mahomad has been running up to the airstrip to take pot shots at the hounds who did the dirty on me. This morning, when you came over, I realized suddenly from the engine it was not the usual machine. When I looked up and saw it was one of our Austers I couldn't believe my eyes.'

'You said you expected me to come looking for you.'

'True enough. But I didn't seriously expect you to find me in this sort of country. How did you do it?'

Biggles gave a brief account of what he and Bertie had done, bringing their side of the story up to date.

'And what are you going to do now?' asked Algy.

'At the moment I have a strong urge to finish what you started. When I came here I was concerned only with you. The smuggling could go hang. But in view of what you've told us, I don't feel like letting these murdering rats get away with it. It might be possible to attend to that while you're getting well enough to travel. I can't stay here myself; what I mean is, I feel it would be folly to leave the Auster up there hoping it would never be spotted. However well it's covered up it could only be a question of time before it was seen by someone landing here; and I imagine no one lands here apart from these crooks. The Auster will be missed from Shara if it doesn't go back, and our friends there, as well as our enemies, will wonder what has become of it.'

'Yes, I can see that.'

'If we went up and found the Auster burnt out it wouldn't make it any easier for you to get home. I can't let Bertie stay here, either. He'd be more useful to me than to you; and there isn't much he could do here — that is, provided Mahomad is prepared to carry on. I ought to take Ram Singh home, too. His absence would lead to awkward questions.'

Mahomad Khan, who had of course heard this conversation, came in. 'I will stay, I am happy here. This is my life.'

'Good. Then that settles one point,' declared Biggles. 'Can you manage here for a bit longer?' he asked Algy.

'I've managed so far. We're not short of food. Mahomad sees to that. He has twice been home to fetch flour and ammunition. He can do it in a day. There are plenty of game birds. We've had venison. There are *mahseeri* in the stream. With fruit and berries we do fine. Mahomad hasn't been a *shikari* for most of his life without learning how to live off the land. The mosquitoes are a

bit troublesome at night, but a smoke fire helps to discourage the little devils. Leeches aren't as bad as I'd have expected, anyway down here. Mahomad thinks the monsoon spates wash them away. They're worse higher up, he tells me.'

'I think monsoon come early this time,' Mahomad said.

'How early?'

'Two weeks, perhaps three.'

'Then as you will have to be out of here before it breaks we've no time to lose,' stated Biggles. 'Tell me more about these aircraft that come here. I must know more about that. How often do they come?'

'Mahomad says there are two of them. They have been coming here for some time. One comes soon after another. They never stay long. What happens is now quite clear. It hooks up with what I knew some time ago. This is where the gold is switched. The mystery plane comes in from somewhere outside India. It dumps the gold. The date and time must be prearranged because almost within minutes the Rapide arrives with Larta to pick it up. I know this from what I have seen myself and from what Mahomad has told me. He didn't know what was going on and he didn't care. As he said to me, it was no concern of his. They didn't interfere with him.'

'Who actually owns this Rapide? Do you know?'

'Yes. Larta. It's his own private plane. He has his own pilot. Naturally, when I arrived in India one of the first things I did was check up on all privately-owned aircraft, as we do at home when we suspect something fishy is going on. Generally, when Larta is engaged on legitimate business he uses the regular air lines. If he's in a hurry and there isn't a flight available it provides him with an excuse to use the Rapide. His reputation for being engaged in big business with offices all over the place — which I believe he himself has deliberately built up — enables him to cut a lot of formalities. I have a suspicion that his agencies are the depots through which he sells, releases or distributes, the smuggled gold.'

'The first night we were at Shara he told us he was a big noise in the import and export business,' said Biggles. 'He volunteered the information. We didn't ask him. The idea, I imagine, was to provide a reason why he had to do a lot of flying. He must have guessed, if he didn't actually know, why we were at Shara.'

'It was really all very easy,' went on Algy. 'As I see it now, his scheme worked like this. For instance, he could be at Delhi, say, on a certain day. Suddenly he gets an urgent call to go to Calcutta. There's no scheduled flight, so out comes the Rapide. He wouldn't have to go far out of his way to call here and pick up the gold, possibly refuelling at Shara before going on to Calcutta. I fancy it's at Shara that he hands over the gold, or some of it, to one of the gang.'

'Bula Din's on his payroll. Larta keeps a car there. Maybe he finishes his journey by road, so dodging any formalities at Calcutta.'

‘Where do you suppose these sovereigns are coming from? That’s still the missing link in the chain.’

Biggles lit a cigarette, shaking his head. ‘I wouldn’t try to guess. Quite a few countries have always carried a gold reserve in British coinage. According to the Bank of England, there are still millions in gold tucked away somewhere — not all in the same place, of course. Gold isn’t as easy to get as it used to be. I’d say these coins Larta is dealing in are old stuff. What’s the date on that coin you have?’

‘Eighteen-ninety-three.’

‘There you are. Gold was then in general circulation. Someone, somewhere, hoarded some, and is now prepared to sell it at a profit. It’d be a good profit, too, with the price gold stands at today. Gold is always gold. There are still people who haven’t much faith in paper money. Now can you tell me this? It’s important, or it will be when the time comes for you to get out of here. When you get up to the landing ground you may have to wait there for some time, and if you, or the plane fetching you, were caught in the open by that grey machine it would be just too bad. The question is, does this gold switch take place at regular intervals, and if so on what days?’

Algy thought for a moment. ‘Up to now I haven’t had any reason to look at things from that angle. Mahomad has been here longer than I have, so he may be able to help us.’

‘The planes used to come on the same day of every month,’ contributed the old *shikari*.

‘How do you work that out?’ asked Biggles. ‘Have you got a calendar?’

‘I don’t need one. The moon is always there. Today I don’t know, perhaps the times have changed; but always in the past the planes have come over on the day after the new moon.’

‘That’s near enough, provided they stick to that schedule,’ said Biggles. ‘Algy, do you think you’ll be able to get up to the landing ground by the end of the week? Say, five days from now?’

‘If I say I’ll be there, I’ll be there.’

‘Better not take any risks.’

‘I shall be there. I’ll take my time.’

‘Soon after dawn.’

‘Fair enough. What’s the plan?’

‘I’ve been thinking and this is my idea. There’s still time for me to get back to Shara today. Sorry, but Bertie and Ram Singh will have to come with me. I may need them, and anyway I’d like to keep things looking normal. I shall drop them off at Shara and go on to Calcutta. There I shall see the official you saw, the one who got you the Hunter — you can tell me his name — and put all the cards on the table. I’ll explain to him how you’re fixed and try to persuade him to lend me another Hunter.’

‘There isn’t much room here for a Hunter to get—’

‘I’m not thinking of landing it here,’ interrupted Biggles. ‘Bertie will do

the landing in the Auster. He'll pick you up.'

'Then what's the idea of the Hunter?'

'I shall stay upstairs in it watching the sky. I'm not taking any chances of that machine-gun-happy merchant coming over while the Auster is on the ground. It'd be a sitting target. If he should come, and tries anything like that, he'll wish he was somewhere else. After what he did to you I shan't be too particular as to what I do to him. If I put him on the carpet it should answer our last question: where he's coming from. The Indian Air Force specialists should soon work that out. In short, Bertie will pick you up while I act as escort. Is that quite clear?'

'Absolutely. Nothing should go wrong with that.'

'Can anyone see any snags?' Biggles looked round.

Only Mahomad hesitated.

'What is it?' inquired Biggles.

'The monsoon. The signs are that it will come early. We must be out of here before it breaks. The river will rise quickly.'

Biggles shrugged. 'The monsoon is something beyond our control, so we might as well forget it. Now it's time we were getting along if we're to make Shara in daylight. Come on, Bertie, and you, Ram Singh. Show us the way up, Mahomad. See you soon, Algy. Now we know where you are, everything should be all right.'

¹ Mahseer. A fish of fair size, rather like a large barbel, common in most Indian rivers.

CHAPTER 16

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE AIRSTRIP

It is unnecessary to relate in detail Biggles's activities for the next few days. They went very much as had been anticipated. On leaving Algy he had flown the Auster to Shara, put off Bertie and Ram Singh, with strict orders to say nothing about what had happened, and gone straight on to Calcutta. There, the next morning, he saw the Chief Officer for Customs and Excise who was delighted to learn that Algy had been found alive and expressed his willingness to do anything Biggles suggested.

On his part, he said, he would get to work at once on a plan for the rounding up of the gold smuggling organization. Larta would be apprehended the next time he stepped out of the Rapide, wherever that might be, and his false leg examined.

Biggles said all he needed was the temporary use of a Hunter. Any business at the airstrip could be left to him.

'Make a good job of it,' said the officer meaningly. 'Whatever happens we shall not hold you to blame.'

The result of all this was, the evening before the day Algy was to be picked up saw Biggles landing a Hunter on the aerodrome at Shara. Ominous clouds were hanging low over the horizon.

'Everything all right?' he asked Bertie, who walked out to meet him.

'No trouble at all, old boy,' answered Bertie, cheerfully. 'But I must say I don't like the look of the weather,' he added, cocking an eye at the clouds, obviously the advance guard of the monsoon.

'It seems we found Algy in what is sometimes called the nick of time,' returned Biggles. 'However, it should be another day or two before the rain hits us.'

'I hope you're right, old boy,' Bertie said seriously. 'So you managed to get your hands on a Hunter.'

'Without any fuss. I have a feeling that the Customs people wouldn't soak their handkerchiefs with tears if I used the guns on anyone who got in my way in the region of the Terai.'

'Jolly good. Where are you going to park the old bird?'

'Beside the Auster. An Indian pilot is flying mine up from Dum Dum. It should soon be here. We can take turns watching them. We mustn't take our eyes off them. We don't want any more fiddling at this stage. I hope you've kept your eyes on the Auster you'll be flying tomorrow.'

'Day and night. Ram Singh has been helping me. We've done a little flying for the look of it.'

'Have you seen Larta?'

'No. I don't think he can have been here.'

‘What about Akbar?’

‘He’s all right. He seems a bit puzzled about what we’re doing. He asked me if we’d given up the search for Algy. I said for the time being.’

‘You didn’t give him any reason to suppose we’d found Algy?’

‘No bally fear.’

‘Quite right. It isn’t that I don’t trust him, but people will talk and at this stage we can’t be too careful. Has Bula Din been behaving himself?’

‘He’s still in the office. He hasn’t spoken to me. I can see him now, watching us from the window.’

‘Looking at the Hunter, wondering what I’m going to do with it, more likely. Well, I couldn’t land here without him seeing it. No doubt he’ll let Larta know it’s here. If he gets a notion of the truth he’ll probably get up to some more devilment to bump us off. Let him try. As I feel now he’ll see what I’m like when I show my teeth. I made a point of topping up before I left Calcutta, so that I wouldn’t have to refuel here. I don’t want dynamite in my tanks. Where’s Ram Singh?’

‘In the hangar watching my Auster.’

‘Good. I’ll put the Hunter inside and we’ll get things fixed for the night. We’ll make an early start in the morning. You’ll go first and I shall follow close behind.’

The day wore on to its close. An uneasy quiet lay over the aerodrome, over everything, the usual hush of expectancy and tension that precedes the monsoon rains after months of a flaming sun toiling endlessly across a sky of implacable blue. Nothing moved. Even the old wind-stocking hung lifeless against its supporting pole. The airfield lay deserted except for an occasional mechanic going from one job to another.

There was a minute or two of interest when, as the afterglow was deepening, a Viscount, wearing the insignia of Indian Air Lines, came in to discharge some passengers before proceeding to its final destination. They were met by Bula Din. Thinking Larta might be among them, Biggles sent Ram Singh to check. He returned to say there were three men. He had never seen any of them before. They had been met by a car, so it seemed they were travelling together.

With the passing of the Viscount the sullen silence settled once more on the sun-scorched aerodrome. Biggles and Bertie sat on improvised seats at the entrance of the hangar that housed their aircraft. Presently they took it in turns to go to the rest-house for a quick meal. There was no one else in the dining-room; no one in the lounge. The staff, under the influence of the weather, were morose. Ram Singh, who had gone home for his meal, returned, hot and tired.

‘The lull before the storm,’ remarked Bertie.

‘You could be right in more senses than one,’ returned Biggles. ‘If the weather will mark time for another twenty-four hours I don’t care what it does after that. When it arrives it’ll bring wind and rain that won’t make our job at the airstrip any easier. I wonder what Larta’s doing? I thought he might show

up here.'

Some time later the aerodrome manager appeared. 'What are you gentlemen doing?' he asked curiously. 'You look like a gathering of conspirators.'

'Maybe we are,' answered Biggles, casually. 'Matter of fact we're reserving our energy for a last effort tomorrow morning to find Lacey and bring him home. With the monsoon threatening we shall have to make an early start and we don't want to risk oversleeping.'

'Well, I wish you luck,' Mr Akbar said. 'I must say you haven't failed so far for want of trying. Have you seen Bula Din?'

Biggles looked up sharply. 'No. Why?'

'I can't find him anywhere. I thought he might have come along to see about getting the hangar doors closed in case the storm should break during the night.'

'If that looks like happening we'll attend to it,' promised Biggles.

'In that case, if I see Bula Din I'll tell him not to bother. Good night.'

'It occurs to me,' said Bertie, after Akbar had gone, 'that these gold merchants must have their own arrangements to make. They're not likely to do any flying while the monsoon lasts, so they must be getting ready to lay off — if you see what I mean. How long does it last?'

'Here in Bengal usually about four months; mid-June to late September. That should give them a rest; but no doubt they've made their pile. I'm only concerned with Algy. I've left it to the Indian Customs men to take care of the rest.' Biggles yawned. 'I may drop off. Wake me if you see Bula Din hanging about.'

The night wore on, with an occasional distant growl of thunder, and after what seemed an eternity a streak of grey light announced the approach of another day.

'All right,' said Biggles sharply, getting up. 'This is it. Let's get weaving. We might as well wait there as here. I shan't bother with breakfast. There'll be plenty of time for that when we get back.'

Everyone knew exactly what he had to do, so there was no delay. Bertie, with Ram Singh beside him, took off in the Auster. Biggles gave him a few minutes' start, and after a last look round the aerodrome, not yet astir, followed in the Hunter.

The day grew, to reveal a sky half covered by a majestic procession of cumulus clouds marching up over the horizon. These were the forerunners of what were to come and were not yet unloading their watery contents; but they made the air bumpy.

Before reaching the Terai, Biggles picked up Bertie in front of him, flying at about two thousand feet; so not wanting to overtake him he took a little more altitude and began a systematic search of the sky in the manner of a combat pilot over hostile country, studying it section by section, aware that any cloud could hide an enemy. A pilot of experience knows how easy it is to

overlook the tiny speck that is an aircraft in the distance, or how quickly one can materialize out of nowhere, as the saying is. Ears, filled with the sound of one's own engine, cannot help as on the ground. In the air one must depend entirely on the eyes.

Every blink of sunshine, when it occurred, he examined closely by raising a hand towards it and peering between the extended fingers. To look directly into the eye of the sun without protection is to ask for temporary blindness. It is impossible to see an aircraft even if it is there, anyway. Actually he did not expect to see another machine, but while the possibility, however remote, was there, he was taking no risks of being taken by surprise.

They were over the Terai now. With the airstrip coming into view ahead he took closer order with the Auster, already losing height. He took up a covering position behind and above it. Suddenly, for no apparent reason it swerved, turning away.

Biggles knew there must have been a reason for this. His eyes swept round the sky. Nothing. They explored the airstrip. He had already glanced at it. It had appeared to be deserted. Now, looking more closely, he made out what Bertie, from his lower altitude, and concentrating his attention on it, must have spotted. In a straight line down the length of the runway a thin, narrow cloud of dust was settling. What had caused it? Wind? A breeze might raise dust, but not in a single straight line. There could be only one explanation. Something had moved at speed over the dry surface. What? There was nothing there now. Not even an animal. He had half expected to see Mahomad and Algy there, waiting. They were not in sight.

He looked again at the dust, now so thin as to be hardly discernible. It struck him as having a familiar appearance. Suddenly he knew. It was just such a cloud as an aircraft taking off would make. Alert, his eyes followed the line into the sky. There was no aircraft in sight. What else could it have been? A galloping deer or buffalo? Possibly. But he could not deceive himself. An aircraft had been there, recently.

He circled, exploring every direction until he was satisfied there was not another machine in the area. The clouds worried him. In one direction they made a curtain through which he could not see. He realized that in the still air a cloud of dust raised by an aircraft taking off could hang in the air for several minutes; and in that time a machine can travel a long way.

Bertie was now cruising up and down and across the end of the open ground as if undecided about what he should do. Biggles roared down alongside. Bertie looked at him through his side window. Biggles jabbed a finger, signalling to him to go down. The Auster's airscrew became a slow spin as the engine was cut. Its nose went down and it glided towards the landing ground.

As soon as he perceived that his signal had been understood Biggles climbed again, making a wide turn to cover all points of the compass. Every few seconds he snatched a glance below. He saw the Auster landing and

watched it touch down. The next time he looked two figures had appeared on the edge of the valley and were hurrying towards it, one hopping awkwardly with a hand on a shoulder of the other for support. Although from the height at which he was flying Biggles could not recognize them, he had no doubt as to who they were.

The next glance down — for most of his attention was still on the sky — showed the Auster taxiing towards them. This was the moment when those on the ground would be most vulnerable should there be trouble of any sort. He sent the Hunter racing round the airstrip to put a protective ‘umbrella’ over them. He did not see Algy actually get into the Auster, but he saw the machine running tail-up in a take-off and knew that he must be on board.

He also saw Mahomad, alone now, running towards the nearest part of the valley. Why, Biggles wondered, was he running? What was the hurry now? Had he seen danger? Heard something? Puzzled, Biggles scanned the sky, and while doing this the answer burst into view. It was the mystery plane, skimming the tree tops in line with the Auster, now airborne. Its intention was clear.

Biggles did not have to think what to do. The plane was after the Auster. The eyes of the pilot would be on his quarry. He was flying dead straight, which made it evident that he had not looked up, or he must have seen the Hunter coming down on him like a stooping falcon.

Biggles knew the moment when Bertie spotted his danger, presumably in his reflector, for he spun round on a wing tip and adopted the escape tactics of a startled snipe.

Biggles, with height to spare, had no difficulty in closing on the attacker. His jaw was set, for he had resolved that this was no time for half measures. He would have to get the mystery plane before it caught up with the Auster, or Bertie, without a gun, wouldn’t have a chance. Nevertheless, he fired a short burst from extreme range to warn the other machine of his presence and so give the pilot a chance to break away should he decide that discretion was more clearly indicated than valour.

The green and brown plane ignored the shots. The pilot may not have heard them. But apparently there was a gunner on board who saw what was happening, for tracer bullets streamed from a gun mounted aft. Biggles had no difficulty in slipping away from them and they flashed harmlessly past the tip of his wing.

Both machines had by now nearly caught up with the slower Auster and Biggles waited no longer. He had given notice of his intention; he knew the other machine was armed, so his conscience was clear. Two quick turns, and with the green and brown plane in his sights, he raked it with a long burst from nose to tail. He thought it should be enough. It was. He knew the pilot had been hit from the way the nose of his machine jerked up. It half rolled, recovered, and ran on in a steep dive away from the Auster, obviously out of control.

Biggles watched, ready to fire again should this be a trick. It became evident that it was not when the green and brown machine, in an ever-steepening dive, plunged into the valley. It hit the trees, ploughed through them in a cloud of leaves and disappeared from sight.

Biggles watched, circling, for signs of fire. He waited a minute, and when no smoke appeared he straightened out in pursuit of the Auster. The last he saw of the airfield was Mahomad standing in the clear, waving. He would have liked to land to have a word with him, but decided it would be stupid to risk damaging the Hunter at this juncture. So he went on after the Auster, now nearly out of sight. His anxiety now was the weather, for the clouds had closed up, shutting out the blue.

CHAPTER 17

BUTTONED UP

Now that the business at the airstrip had been concluded satisfactorily Biggles's nerves relaxed. He felt suddenly tired. He experienced a sudden pang of sympathy for the pilot he had never seen; there was none of the elation of victory such as he had known after a war-time duel. He consoled himself with the thought that he had not sought the green and brown machine. What he had done had been forced on him. Had he not shot down the mystery plane, the pilot, he was sure, would have killed those in the Auster, which had no means of defending itself. 'The trouble with me is I'm getting old,' he told himself moodily. Even so he was relieved to know his eyes and hands had not lost their competence. It was a long time since he had engaged in an air combat.

On the flight back to base he had time to think about what had happened. Not that there was much to think about. He had not expected to find air activity on the airstrip. That was a surprise. Perhaps Algy would be able to tell them the reason for it, he pondered, as he overtook the Auster and took station above and behind it, his eyes still questing the cloud-torn sky. He was still on guard against a surprise attack. A big drop of rain smacking against his windscreen told him the rescue had been effected just in time.

On reaching Shara, he waited for the Auster to land and then went in behind it. As he did so a frown furrowed his forehead. Standing in front of the administration buildings, its airscrew dead, was an aircraft, a Rapide. He stared. There was no one with it. Could it be Larta's private plane, or was this a coincidence? The thought occurred to him that this might be the machine that had landed on the airstrip before his arrival; but he dismissed it as improbable. Anyway, he would soon know, he thought, as he touched down and taxied to the apron in front of the hangar where the Auster had stopped. Bertie and Ram Singh were helping Algy out.

'Great work,' Biggles greeted as he joined them. To Bertie in particular he said: 'Do you see what's here?'

'You mean the Rapide?'

'Of course.'

'That's Larta's machine.'

'How do you know?' asked Biggles, eyebrows raised.

'Algy told me.'

'What the devil's he doing here?'

'I don't know, but Algy says that machine was on the airstrip this morning before we got there.'

'Doing what?'

'Picking up a bag which the green and brown machine had planted there a

few minutes earlier.'

'Then it must have hung about to watch if the Rapide picked it up.'

Algy spoke. 'Sitting on the bank with Mahomad, I saw it all. A nice sweat we were in, too, I can tell you, expecting you to roll up any second. There was nothing we could do about it. Mahomad didn't dare to try any shooting for fear of making matters worse. We just prayed that the two machines would clear off before you arrived.'

'Well, I'll go hopping!' muttered Biggles. 'Let's get to the office to see what goes on.'

'Personally,' said Algy succinctly, 'I don't care what goes on. Plenty of hot water and a razor are all I ask.'

'You'd better stay here,' Biggles told Ram Singh. 'There's no need for you to get mixed up in this.'

Giving Algy a helping hand, they walked on towards the buildings. There was still nobody in sight, but as they drew near Mr Akbar strode out. He seemed agitated. His face wore an expression of bewilderment. 'I saw you coming,' he said. 'Who's that with you?' He was staring at Algy. 'It isn't — no, it can't be, Mr Lacey.'

'It is,' stated Biggles. 'He's been in the jungle for over a month.'

'That's what he looks like.'

'He's in a hurry to get to the bathroom,' Biggles said. Then, speaking to Bertie, 'You carry on. I'll join you presently.'

'You must tell me later how you found him,' said Akbar. 'I must go back to the office. We've had a nasty business going on here. Came as a complete surprise to me. A police raid.'

'Oh!'

Akbar went on, dropping his voice. 'I think I may tell you. Some gold smugglers have been caught in the act. One of them a member of my staff. And I never suspected it.'

'You mean Bula Din.'

Akbar looked astonished. 'You knew?'

'I've known for some time.'

'And you didn't tell me!' Akbar looked hurt.

'We had good reasons. You wouldn't have believed me if I had told you. Who arrested him?'

'Police and Customs officers came here last night, but I didn't know who they were. They flew in from Calcutta.'

'Have they arrested anyone else?'

'Yes. You'll never believe it. Mr Holman Larta and his pilot. They were arrested as they got out of their plane. The police were waiting for them. I thought they were mad. But they were right. Mr Larta was taken to my office to be searched. He had a quantity of gold on him. The amazing thing was, the police seemed to know exactly where to look for it. You'd never guess.'

'In his artificial leg, perhaps?'

Akbar's mouth fell open in his astonishment. 'You seem to know more about this than I do.'

'We haven't wasted our time here. We know quite a lot. In fact, you might say I was responsible for these arrests. I have more news for the police. But never mind that now. Lacey has an injured leg and I'd like a doctor to have a look at it if you would call one on the phone.'

'I'll certainly do that.'

'Good. Excuse me now. We haven't had breakfast yet. You might tell whoever is in charge of the party from Calcutta that I'd like a word with him before he leaves.'

'I'll tell him. They're waiting for a plane. One is being sent from Calcutta to fetch them.'

'Good. I'll see you later, Mr Akbar, and tell you all about it.' Biggles walked on to the rest-house.

That, for all practical purposes, was the end of Algy's tour of duty in India. A medical examination revealed there was nothing wrong with him. Indeed, considering what he had been through he was in good health, due entirely to the old *shikari*'s care and attention, for which he was suitably rewarded by the Indian government, apart from a personal present which Algy sent later from London.

While on the subject of rewards it may be said here that on parting with Ram Singh, who had been so helpful, Biggles induced him to accept enough rupees to buy himself a new bicycle. Although he demurred, he was obviously delighted, saying with a smile that one doesn't expect to be rewarded for having a good time. Secretly, Biggles also recommended him to the attention of the Indian air authorities.

Only Biggles saw Mahomad Khan again, and it came about in this way. While still at Shara, when it came to making his statement to the police (which was quite an affair taking all day) he had of course to report the shooting down of the aircraft that had been flying the gold into the country. No blame was attached to him for this; but he was still unable to identify it, or suggest where it may have come from, and this, understandably, was what the Indian government was most anxious to know. Larta refused to speak and Bula Din insisted that he didn't know, which may have been true.

Feeling sure that Mahomad Khan would have found the crash, because he must have seen where the aircraft fell, Biggles suggested the question could be answered by an examination of the wreckage. If technicians were flown out to the airstrip it should be possible for them to make contact with Mahomad, who would show them where it lay.

The suggestion was accepted; but there was a difficulty. No one knew the locality of the secret airstrip and there were no landmarks by which it could be described. There was still some doubt as to whether the landing ground was in India or Nepal, the boundary being undefined, so it was possible that

Mahomad, fearing he might get into trouble for poaching, would make himself scarce if he saw Indian officials arrive. He might even discourage overtures with his rifle. To avoid any trouble of this sort Biggles offered to fly someone out in the Auster in the hope of effecting the necessary introduction.

The outcome of this was, as soon as Algy had been taken care of Biggles flew two Indian officials to the spot, his Auster being followed by a reserve (Indian) aircraft that would pin-point the place and bring home the officials when their work, which might take some days, was finished. Biggles did not want to waste time there; he was anxious to get back to London.

When the party arrived at the airstrip there was no sign of Mahomad, but Biggles brought him out of the valley by flying up and down 'blipping' his engine. Introductions having been made, and the purpose of the officials explained, Biggles, after asking Mahomad what he would like for a present to be sent out later, returned to Shara.

What was learned from the crash he never knew. He was not told. The whole thing was made top secret by Security officials and he asked no questions, being content to remain in ignorance of information which might turn out to be embarrassing, if not then, on some future occasion.

Of course, the Indian technicians would be able to ascertain the plane's country of origin, but it did not follow that the crew would be of the same nationality. In view of what they were doing they would hardly be likely to carry identity papers, so they might be subjects of any country in the civilized world. They might even have been British, for criminal enterprises of an adventurous nature are not confined to any particular part of the globe. Anyway, if the Indian government knew the answer to this question it was never revealed. It might have caused recriminations and they can lead to trouble.

Biggles saw no more of Holman Larta or Bula Din. He had no reason to see them. They were still awaiting trial when, with Algy beside him, and Bertie flying the second Auster (Algy's original machine) they left India for home. As the gold smugglers had been caught with the gold on them, their evidence was not required.

Why Larta and his unknown confederate — with whom he was probably in touch — should have used the airstrip on the very morning Algy was to be picked up remained a matter for surmise. According to what Mahomad had said, the day was not on their regular schedule. The reason may have been that the gang was anxious to get one last consignment of gold through before the monsoon arrived to put an end to flying for some time; on the other hand it could well be that Larta was getting worried by what was going on at Shara, and, feeling the end of the racket was in sight, decided to make one final haul.

To Biggles it was of no importance. He was well content with the way the mission had ended. As he remarked to Algy, the Indian Customs officials were welcome to any credit that was due now that he was going home with what he had gone to India to find.

THE END